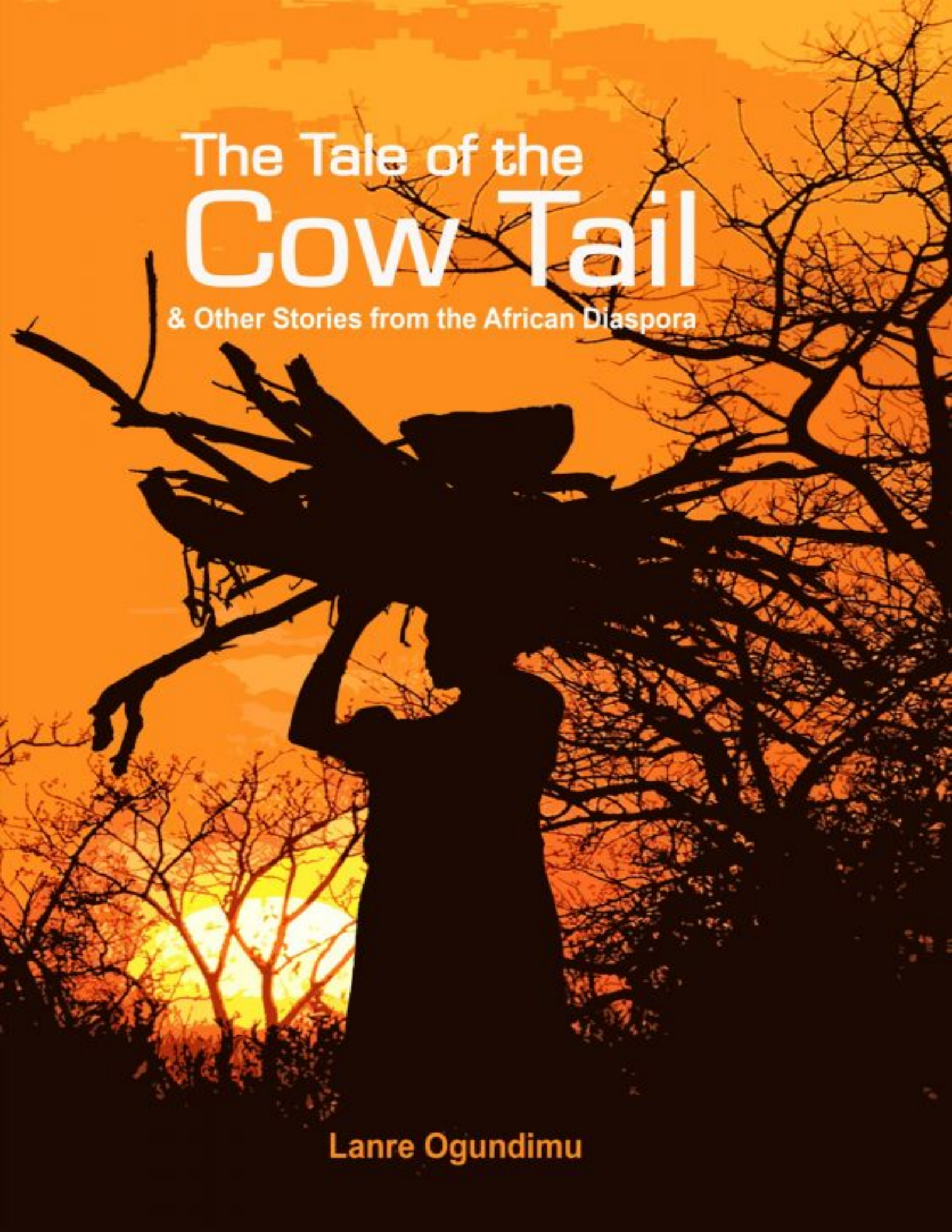
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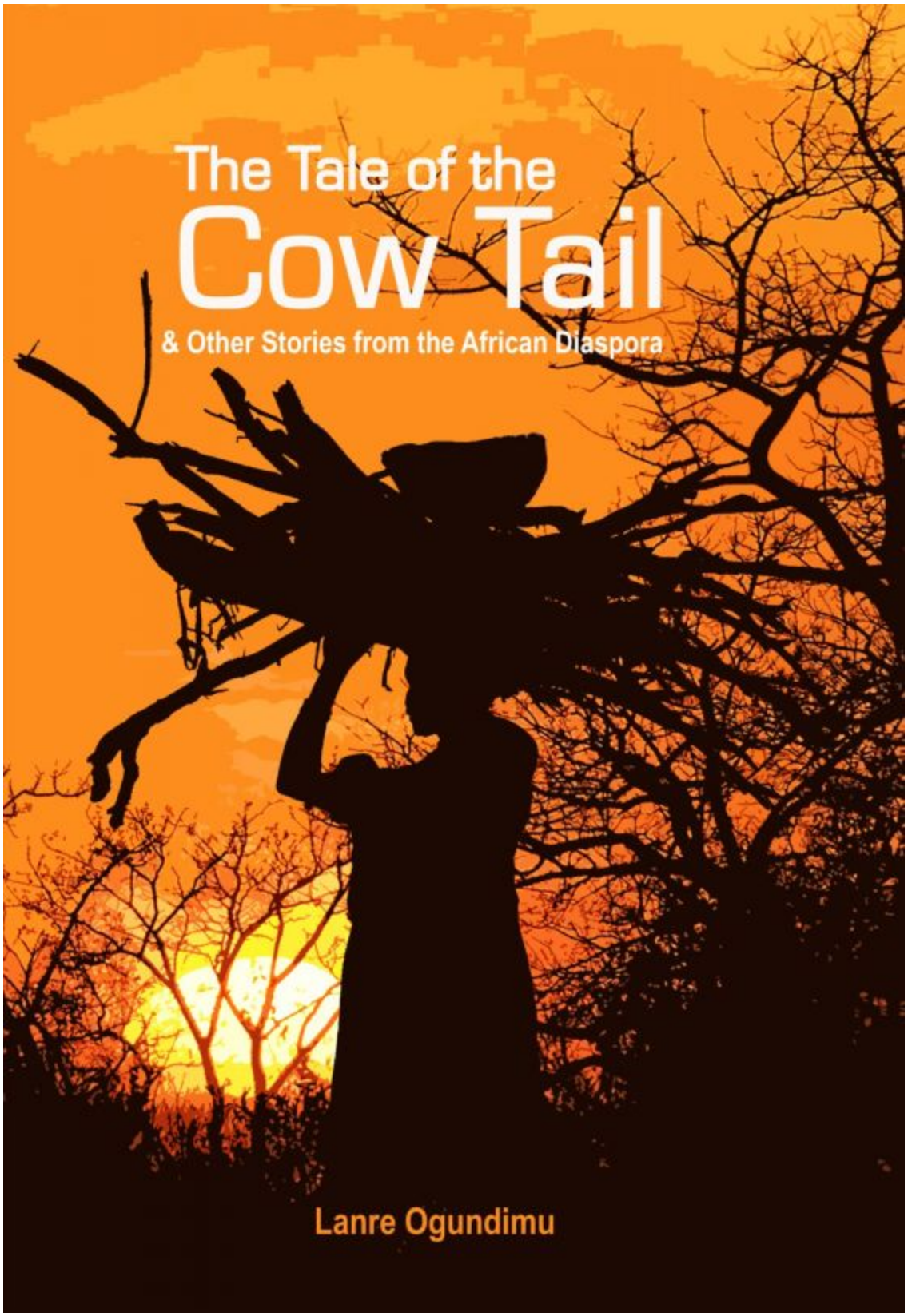
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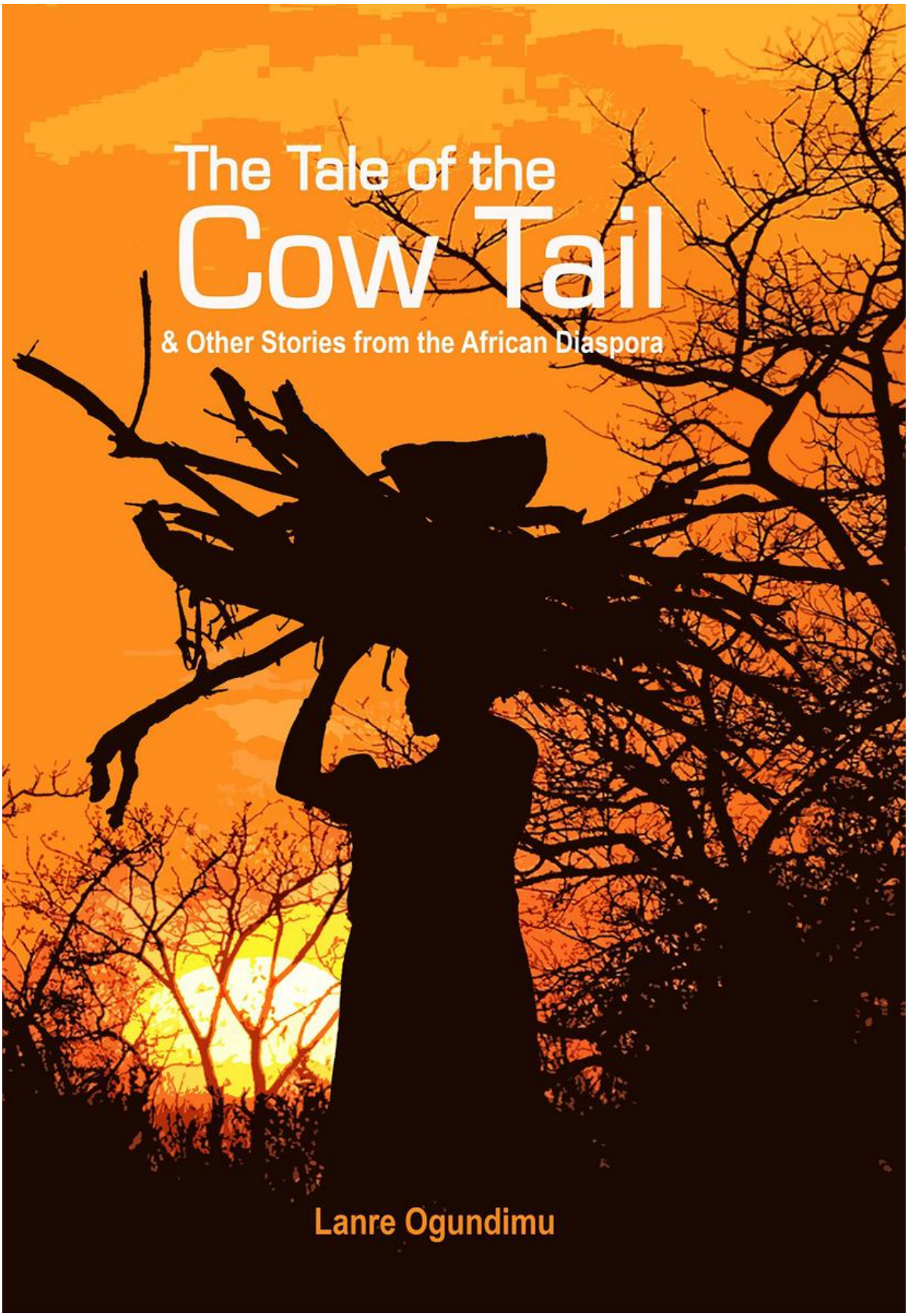
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Dedication

To my wife –
For accepting me for who I am—
a quiet, ascetic book lover.

Preface

Every human life is a work of art and, within us, stirs a story waiting to be told. But you never know how interesting your experiences are until you begin to share them.

Many people are like me. They have a problem finding the time to reflect on the present, ponder the future and turn to the past to elicit that treasure trove of memories. They also have a difficult time making a commitment to do the very thing they have been dreaming about: writing. For many years, I nurtured a myriad of stories in my mind. One day, I finally conquered the demon by putting those tales onto paper. In the process, I removed a heavy burden.

This book is the result. Some are stories of my life, some are stories I heard from friends and families, and some are stories from my escape into my own world as I daydreamed during quiet moments.

They are stories of love and hate, good and evil, sobriety and drunkenness, vices and virtues, and sadness and joy. They are also tales about fundamental human rights, corruption, greed, rebellion, mystery, passion, friendship, rage, laughter, youth, old age, human frailty, death and immortality. And the stories contain elements of surprise as well as special morals and odd twists.

Part One is a collection of true stories based on my recollections of some events in my life and the lives of people very close to me.

Part Two is a mixture of some true stories and my thoughts on some topical issues and societal values. It's a compilation of witty sayings and native anecdotes that have had a strong impact on my life. In some cases, I changed the names and personalities of certain individuals to protect their privacy. Also, I rearranged the sequence of events and timing of some stories, and recreated dialogues to advance the tales.

While working on this project, a voice continued to ring in my ears. And the message was this: Our lives are creative tales begging to be told. They

are outrageous episodes and quiet adventures.

Simply put, our lives are books waiting to be written.

Part One

Saraa

The devil always provides food for a stray dog. – Yoruba proverb

That adage pithily captures my experience and that of my young friends as we grew up in Ebute Meta, Lagos, in the late 1960s and early 70s. Ebute Meta was a great place for children because we never lacked good friends (or bad ones for that matter). The area was a well-planned maze of tidy streets and roads that resembled rows intersecting and connecting. House number 18 Ondo Street, West, where I lived, was a compound of detached two-story buildings. These were not blocks of flats, but a stretch of rooms (some of them apartments) all sharing common utilities—kitchens, bathrooms and toilets. About twelve families, comprising around 40 children, lived in the compound. Many of the other compounds in the neighborhood were also home to a number of large families. It was a close community and every child in it knew one another by first name.

We always looked forward to the occasional tales by moonlight by any elderly mother in the compound. Usually, a mother who was free that evening (most often my mother) would gather us together and sit us on raffia mats or on the bare concrete floor while regaling us with stories about how the greedy tortoise got its hunch back and ragged shell. Or she'd tell us how the dog escaped with its family to the moon, and how its shadow could be seen if one looks closely under the moonlight. We loved it when she made funny gestures or changed the inflections in her voice to imitate characters in the stories, making us laugh or feel scared. Often, what we loved most were the songs that she rendered. Every story was accompanied by a melodious or soulful chorus, and we always sang along gleefully.

But one experience was even more exciting: making boats out of paper and racing them along the drainage. We cherished those paper boat sailing contests. The gutters, which were around two-feet wide and connected from street to street endlessly, were cleaned by the Lagos City Council workers frequently. Because of their dedication, there wasn't an acrid stench, except the smell of burnt tar or bitumen that came from the well-coated road.

We first made the boat by folding a sheet of paper intricately into a square or rectangle. We re-opened only one fold, which we then folded in half from top to bottom but with a crease down the center. From there, we continued to create intricate folding patterns, tucking, creasing until the paper looked like a triangular bowl with the tip at the bottom. The boat that eventually emerged was a fine piece of craftwork.
We then gathered together, sometimes with children from my compound or our friends from opposite or adjacent houses. As our boats sailed along the channel, we followed and watched them from house to house and street to street. The boat that remained afloat longest was the winner. Sometimes, we would race for about 500 meters before realizing that we had gone far.

Occasionally, we went to the Odaliki compound, three houses away, to watch the *Igunnuko* masqueraders as they visited Mama Tawa's family. Mama Tawa was Nupe, an ethnic group from Niger State, the middlebelt of Nigeria. My parents never knew we went to the gathering of masqueraders. Yet, we managed to go, and we enjoyed them immensely, especially when we got a chance to see *Kurekure*–the little masquerader—as he flipped or somersaulted to the heavy rhythm of the *bembe* drum.

Our greatest thrill was the intermittent "*saraa*" (sacrifice) given by some families. Once, a particular family in my compound gave the most enjoyable *saraa*. Why the *saraa*? For whom? Who advised the family to do so? What curse was it meant to cure or wave away? We never asked and never probed. Later, when we had grown up and many of us had become spiritually enlightened, we started to ponder on those *saraa* because it meant something more than a mere feast.

Saraa originally means alms and is a concept of Islamic origin. Among the Yoruba, sacrifice is known as *ebo*. Hence, to offer sacrifice is "*ru ebo*." Sacrifices can take several forms and are offered for various reasons. It could be for religious charity; as an offering to deities and a request for material blessings; as a tributary like those by the Sango worshippers; and to placate a god (*etutu*). Its purpose is to commune with the gods. Hence, people bring offerings of goats, kolanuts, bitter kola, chickens, clothes, palm oil, cowries, money and bean cakes—anything that is believed to be

liked by the gods. The belief is that a man who offers sacrifices regularly and adequately will receive favor from the gods.

Here is the crux of the matter. Over the years, I've concluded that the *saraa* given intermittently by a particular family on Ondo Street was sinister. As a Christian, I support alms giving and charity to the poor. But I detest the type that is offered to deities and meant to steal children's destinies and other people's good fortune. For example, those with evil intentions could consult an oracle to find out whether a child would be prosperous in life. If the child has a bright future, the man could offer *saraa* to him or her. By inviting the one with the bright future to eat from the *saraa*, the corrupt individual is attempting to steal the future or destiny of such child. This form of *saraa* is diabolical because it turns a child's rising star into a premature sunset.

Meanwhile, we reveled in the *saraa* and anxiously anticipated them. Rumors about upcoming *saraa* traveled fast in the area. Children told friends when and where the next one would take place. However, many of us limited our feasting to our compound and to houses that were adjacent or close by.

"*E yin omo kekeke e wa je saraa*" (Little children come and eat the feast), a child bellowed to playmates in the neighborhood. We scuttled to the venue, jostling and shoving ourselves into just the right space. The purpose was to get a vintage position on the mats. The raffia mats were placed on the ground and arranged by the family of the celebrant, according to the age group of the children.

We never bothered about hygiene. We never cared about cleaning our hands after playing or trailing the paper boats. We didn't even care if Bayo, the boy from the opposite house, had mucus continuously dripping from his nose. All we wanted was to consume those *saraas*.

We formed a circle on the mats, sat cross-legged, and waited for the feast to arrive. Meanwhile, we salivated as the aroma of the rice and stew floated into our tiny noses. Most of us fantasized about having the entire tray solely. We became lively upon seeing the rice in a flat rectangular tray, with

neither meat nor chicken. In those years, rice was an uncommon daily meal; it was a Sunday delicacy or for special occasions–birthdays, weddings or burials.

We descended on the bowl of rice like locusts attacking a cornfield. Everybody had his/her style of eating as much as possible. *Saraa* was not a feast for a sluggish child because the smartest kids enjoyed the most.

At the end of the feast, we sang for the celebrant.

> *Oni saraa yi ko ni ku*
> *O ni saraa yi ko ni run*
> *To ba dele a ra moto*
> *Ibon lo ma yin dele.*
>
> The celebrant will not die
> The celebrant will not decay
> He will buy a car when he gets home
> And announce his arrival with a hail of bullets.

The song was meaningless, but we chanted it joyfully and with zeal.

There was another type of *saraa*, which no one ever ate, except Jombo. Jombo was a chubby, dark-complexioned boy who lived on Odaliki Street. He was our contemporary, but we thought he was too heavyset to be our age mate. Most of us thought he was weird or even crazy. We thanked God he was not in our circle.

Often, as some of my classmates and I went to our primary school, United African Methodist Church, Eleja, on Jebba street, during the weekdays, we found sacrifices at the Odaliki and Ondo streets' junction. We fleetingly gazed at the eggs, solid pap, kolanuts and coins, drenched in palm oil, in broken brown or black pots or calabashes. We asked ourselves: Who placed the sacrifices there? When were they brought? Why?

We chanted the antidote, "*Ebo elebo pada lehin mi*" (Sacrifice, get behind me), to wave away the evil spirit of the sacrifice. We swirled our right hand

over our heads, as we snapped the thumb and the middle finger at the same time. And we moved on.

We heard many tales about what Jombo did with the sacrifices. On many occasions, Jombo urinated on them, then picked up the coins. We never found out what he spent the money on or where. Maybe on *dankuwa* (crushed and roasted groundnut snacks) or *tanfiri* (ground, peppered and roasted corn snacks).

Kala Oju, also known as Franco Nero, was more daring than Jombo. He was a lunatic and although he was probably only in his forties, he had the most penetrating gaze and frown we had ever seen. Hence, the nickname, Franco Nero. As he wandered naked in his charred skin along the street, Kala Oju would stop suddenly to speak with an unseen ancestor.

Whenever Kala Oju came across a fresh sacrifice at the junction, he would devour everything and leave the coins. We always wondered why he never "*peed*" on the sacrifices before eating the feasts like Jombo always did before picking the coins. We surmised that only a madman would dare the curse of the gods.

Oseni Se Dodo was the most daring. He was the first madman I ever saw who considered himself elegant in a lemon-colored, black-striped tweed coat. Oseni Se Dodo's shack was at the back of the M.D. Bank office building. After discovering a sacrifice, Oseni Se Dodo would carry the pot or calabash into his shed. We never knew what happened to it thereafter.

If the vultures fail to surface after a sacrifice is made, then there must be a problem in the land of the spirits. – Yoruba proverb

Days turned into weeks, and months rolled into years. One of the daughters of the family that frequently gave *saraa* in my compound went insane. At times, she would become so violent that her father was forced to shackle her legs with chains.

My family left the compound and resettled in another part of Lagos.

Since then, my life has changed for the better, and Lagos has changed too–for better or for worse. But the placement of sacrifices at the roundabouts or junctions did not stop in some parts of the metropolis–even in the year 2009.

On many occasions, I have seen sacrifices along a major bridge on the Lagos Island. As I exit the Third Mainland Bridge, shift into the circular turn, and ascend the bridge that connects Simpson street to the Ikoyi Federal Secretariat Road, I often notice them: the broken pot, palm fronds, white or *ankara* cloths soaked in palm oil and placed jauntily on the walkway or on top of the median beam.

Although I try to avert my gaze, that's not always easy. It all depends on where the sacrifice is placed. At times, I have looked away and then found myself staring over my left shoulder to avoid running into the vehicle coming from the left on Simpson street. Still, one thing is certain: Whenever I happen to see signs of a *saraa*, I no longer revert to the customs practiced during my childhood—swirling the right hand, snapping the thumb and the middle finger over the head. However, I have occasionally recalled another Yoruba proverb:

And we must continue to offer sacrifices
so that the blame will be on the gods

Baba Ramo

They encircle the mahogany bean tree, but it is too much to handle; they encircle the baobab tree, but it is too much to handle; they encircle the water well, but it is not something to jump into in anger.

– A witty Yoruba expression

I have never smoked cigarettes or taken alcoholic drinks in my life, but I've helped an elderly man sell marijuana for a day. It was in 1977, at Imota, Lagos State, when I was in class one. I was 13 years old and living in the school principal's house. My principal, Mr. "Double" Kuti lived in Sagamu, Ogun State, but occasionally stayed at a four-bedroom upper flat owned by Alhaji Adegun, a prominent community leader. The building, which had a couple of shops on the ground floor, was near a major motor park.

When Mr. Kuti was transferred from our school, our problems started. We returned from a long holiday just in time to receive notice from Alhaji Adegun that we should vacate his property. He explained that the "big man" who rented the flat from him had defaulted on his rent payment.

So, we all moved out. Six of us contributed money to rent a room at the next compound. As it turned out, the compound was also the home of Baba Saku Ala'ye. A sedate-looking character, Baba Saku Ala'ye was probably in his early forties. Occasionally, he was warm; other times he was quite cold or passionate or dull. He had thin brows, a sparkling light in his eyes and a bass voice. He dressed well, in native attire with cap to match. He was gifted with sarcastic humor, enjoyed fibs and spoke in street slang. I thought his language was weird, maybe because of the class of people to whom he sold his wares. Someone who sold marijuana to bus drivers and touts must be witty and sharp like an ala'ye (a rascal). I didn't know if he also smoked the hemp because he never appeared stoned. But what did I even know then?

Apart from the motor drivers and touts, some students in my school visited Baba Saku Ala'ye. Those were the big boys, the senior students who were never afraid of teachers in the school.

Baba Saku Ala'ye told us that marijuana was a good muscle pain reliever; it could also cure anxiety and sleeplessness; it was a strong manhood booster, and most of all it was the greatest medicine for courage.

Then one day, Baba Saku Ala'ye traveled to Ikorodu, a nearby town about a 30-minute drive from Imota. It was a Saturday and his son was not in; neither was anybody else, except me. Baba Saku Ala'ye left his wares with me, each finger long, wrapped in white papers. I could not now remember the cost of a stick. However, five or six customers showed up that day. As they puffed and exhaled the weed, one of them, a fellow with downcast eyes, gnashed his teeth in excitement, and pulsed his cheeks in and out like a blacksmith bellows. The smell of herbal fragrance filled the air. It was soporific.

I wondered what sort of life that was. My mind went to my parent's advice about staying away from bad friends. I even thought about the fact that if Mr. Kuti had paid the rent, Alhaji Adegun would not have sent us out of his apartment, and I would not have found myself in this predicament. I was about to become a lost soul.

Alhaji Adegun came to the rescue. He knew what was sold at Baba Saku Ala'ye's compound. Alhaji offered us one room in his family compound at Itun-Onabu. He stayed in the main compound with his wife and children, while we lived in a room in the boys' quarters. The house, near the residence and not the palace of Oba Ranadu of Imota, was adjacent to the post office operated by one Mrs. Onikoyi.

Six of us moved into the 10-by-10-foot room. Meanwhile, two other students were already living there—eight of us in all.

Some students from my school lived in the next compound. Four of them shared a room. The front of the compound had a beer parlor operated by the Olufowobi's family from Epe in Lagos State. Baba Ramo, probably in his late forties or early fifties, also lived in one of the rooms.

Baba Ramo was irascible and rascally. He had a gap tooth pillared by big incisors. He also had a cocky grin, which often turned into a grimace. His

laughter was ribald. He liked us because we were scholars, and he wished he was as educated as we were. He also loved his only child then–a lovely girl named Ramota or Ramo. But he quarreled with his wife often. She was hot-tempered, short and stern looking.

Whenever we gathered in one of my friend's room, Baba Ramo often joined us to hear the gist from the Lagos boys, as he was fond of calling us. Along the way, he told us tales about his escapades as a young boy, hunting in the dense forest with his father. He loved to amuse us with stories of mysterious animals such as the giant antelope with six legs. Some of his tales sounded like fables to us, but we never questioned him about them. We loved his stories. They were enigmas that always ended with "finis," a folksy way of saying finish.

He also told us about herbs and *juju*. And those were the scary tales. The more we listened, the more they fascinated us.

One day, and I could not now remember how the discussion started, Baba Ramo told us about the Kiriji, Ijaiye and other Yoruba wars. Then he told us that many great Yoruba warriors had, among other fetish devices, a bullet-proof device (*Ayeta*) to deflect ammunition. According to him, a typical *Ayeta*, about the size of a kolanut, is sewn into a hat, cap or the edge of a cloth. Any bullet aimed at the wearer of this charm is deflected away.

When he said this, he looked at us and probably thought that we didn't take him seriously.

"Ehn, Eeeehn; books should not make you forget where you are coming from," Baba Ramo said blandly as he made for the door. He turned back and said, "I'm coming back."

And we waited. About five minutes later, Baba Ramo emerged. His eyes were red like fireballs, and he shook and puffed as if he was possessed. He wore a red vest dotted with white cowry shells. A small brown gourd, held by a rope, dangled from his neck. He held a Dane gun.

I was cold to the bone.

“Ooookaay, who would like to test me with the gun?” Baba Ramo asked through a dazzling smile. “Whether the bullet proof vest would work or not, who would like to volunteer and take the gun from me and shoot me?”

Nobody answered.

“Anyone who doubts the Yoruba powers should come and shoot me,” Baba Ramo asked again.
When we didn’t say anything, he filled the silence for us.

“Finis,” Baba Ramo said, and he added his ribald laughter.

He left. As we began to discuss this matter, Baba Ramo returned. This time, his body was bare from the waist up as he exposed his rounded and well-shaped arms. He had an amulet on his left arm and a cutlass on his right hand.

Again, silence filled the room.

“Can you see this charm?” Baba Ramo asked, pointing to the amulet on his arm. “This is to prevent machete cuts. As I put this on, nobody can cut me with a machete and make me bleed.”

I swallowed hard and watched my colleagues as their eyes opened widely.

Baba Ramo beckoned to Brother Jide, the eldest among us, to take the machete and strike him anywhere on his body. Brother Jide nodded his head in rejection. Baba Ramo called for any other volunteer. Nobody moved. As we took in more of what was unfolding, Baba Ramo hit himself harder and harder with the machete on the thighs, legs, chest and arms. After about twenty of such heavy hits, he stopped. He panted and then roared with an elated laughter. I was scared.

The old man then told us that as long as the amulet remained on him, there would be no cut. But if he took off the amulet, something would happen. And I was afraid of what might happen. Suddenly, Baba Ramo unhooked

the brown, circular amulet. And there, everywhere he had hit himself, emerged huge contours, reddish and thick like millipedes.

“Ehn, Ehn finis,” Baba Ramo said with a loud giggle.

From that day, Baba Ramo became a mystery—a demon who could drink hot pap with the devil. But he remained our charming old friend.

One day, he told us another story. Baba Ramo said there was a place in Ogun State, called Imosan, close to Ijebu Ode—a city located in south-western Nigeria. Ijebu Ode is about 110 kilometers from Lagos. In Imosan, there was a sacred forest where people visit on pilgrimage for the *Agemo* festival. *Agemo* was a masquerader. People also went during the convention to get power and test the efficacy of dangerous charms. At the convocation, people cursed one another as a sort of greeting.

Although I didn’t know where Imosan was then, I had watched the Agemo festival held at Imota. The masquerader often came out as part of the ritual to celebrate the death of an illustrious citizen (known as indigenes). The ceremony was held at the motor park, and indigenes of Imota within and outside the town came home to celebrate the occasion. One of the spectacles I found most intriguing was the cane whipping. (People actually took turns whipping themselves with canes.) There was also the rich, rhythmical heavy drum beaten by bare-chested men, and the sonorous tone of the gong created by a maestro. When the *Agemo*, a mat-like masquerader appeared, the arena turned into a frenzy of prayers and rapturous dance.

Baba Ramo explained that when he was a teenager, he went to Imosan with his father. Upon their arrival at the convocation, Baba Ramo said he observed that people would curse themselves thus: So, you made it again this year, may you not come next year.

Baba Ramo said he was scared but confident that his father would shield him from those flying curses. On the second day of the convention, Baba Ramo said he wanted to empty his bowels. So, he told his father.

“Abomination,” his father shouted. “Ye, ye, ye child, you want to kill yourself? What a sacrilege!”

Baba Ramo said he wondered whether he had said something wrong while his tummy continued to rumble. At that instance, he was about to empty his bowels in his shorts. His father told him there was no public toilet in the area, and if anyone excreted in the bush, the feces could be used by evil people. The elderly man then brought a gourd from his khaki pouch. He opened it and poured some black powder into Baba Ramo’s left palm. He told Baba Ramo to swallow it. The little boy swallowed the powder. Instantly, Baba Ramo was relieved. He felt no need to clear his bowels again. A few days later, the convention ended and everybody left. And that was when Baba Ramo’s problem started.

“For three days after we got home, I couldn’t go to the toilet,” Baba Ramo told us as we listened to him with pity. “I continued to eat a lot of food, but my stomach became bigger, rounder and thicker, like a rock. When it became painful, I told my father.”

“What did your father say?” Rotimi asked mischievously. Rotimi was a fair complexioned boy, with brown specks on his face and body. He was a year my senior at school.

“Wait now. I’m coming to that,” Baba Ramo said, shifting left and right on his seat as if something had bitten him underneath his trousers. A half-moon shaped grin appeared on his mouth.

“My father shouted in surprise. He said I wanted to kill myself. Why didn’t I tell him I could no longer discharge,” Baba Ramo said.

“So my father brought another small gourd and poured some black powder, different from the one I took at Imosan,” Baba Ramo continued. “I swallowed it. Thereafter, he poured palm oil into my hand, and told me to lick it. I did.”

We were quiet as we waited eagerly for Baba Ramo to continue the tale. Instead of continuing the tale, he giggled uncontrollably. We were infected.

Baba Ramo looked unto the ceiling, patted his rotund belly and exhaled loudly.

“Immediately after I took the concoction, my belly started to sing,” Baba Ramo said. “I ran out of the room toward the bush toilet at the back of the house. Before I could even lower my knickers, the thing exploded from my anus,” Baba Ramo said with a childlike guffaw.

We joined with raucous laughter.

“Finis,” Baba Ramo said triumphantly, “Finis.”

You Should Have Brought Chloroquine

When it's not yet time for a sick man to die,
Death will get him a good herbalist. – Yoruba proverb

The first time I was ever admitted to a hospital was in 1993, and what landed me on the sick bed was heartbreak. I was a young bachelor with a good job and a bright future. My family and other friends expected me to marry soon. At 29 years, I thought there was still enough time left to settle down. But when the only girlfriend I had said it was over because I was an "Egba man," I was deeply troubled. I was crushed not because she left me, but because the excuse was cruel. I am from Abeokuta, the Egba community in Ogun State, and her uncle, who had lived among the Egbas, said Egba men weren't any good. According to him, we were treacherous. It was also unfair because, although I'm an indigene of Abeokuta, I was born in Lagos and attended school in Lagos.

So, this made me ponder and ponder. No matter how many times I tried to push this out of my mind, the thought kept rushing back like a powerful tide. It ebbed then returned with a mighty surge. I couldn't eat well for several days. I walked around in a daze, in a world devoid of meaning. I was in extreme anguish and my heart throbbed more and more than I could endure.

Five days later, I went to the hospital. I was feverish when the nurse first checked my temperature. Thereafter, I was checked into a ward where I spent three days. After a series of tests, I was diagnosed with Hepatitis B—an infectious illness caused by the Hepatitis B virus, which infects the liver and causes inflammation. The acute illness causes liver inflammation, vomiting, and jaundice. Chronic Hepatitis B may eventually cause liver cirrhosis and liver cancer—a fatal disease with very poor response to current chemotherapy.

Well, I couldn't argue with the diagnosis, but I knew I didn't have that disease. I was sure of what was wrong with me. It was a broken heart.

Anyway, I was discharged from the hospital after treatment. However, medicine wasn't the source of my quick recovery. It was my father's words of wisdom.

"When you want to learn how to ride a horse and it throws you down, you should never give up. Mount it again until you can ride it well," he said.

For sixteen years thereafter, I was never ill until a day in May 2009.

I was on a trip to the United States to visit my wife and children. On May 9, the journey from the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria, to Frankfurt in Germany was hitch free. I even had a seat upgrade from the economy class to the business class on the Lufthansa airline because I had accumulated many frequent-flier miles. After about a six-hour journey, the plane arrived in Germany, and I boarded a connecting flight to the United States. Shortly after the trip began, I started to feel uncomfortable. I shivered, my body ached, I lost appetite, and my heart thumped heavily. Not long after, I became dizzy. When I could no longer bear it, I beckoned to a hostess and told her I was dying.

By chance, the man next to me in the three-seater in the economy class, was a medical doctor. I later discovered that he and his wife, who was also seated in our row, were on their way to New York.

I was taken to an empty seat in the business class. After examining me with the stethoscope and checking my pulse with his hand, the doctor asked if I had a history of low blood pressure. I said no.

"You have low blood pressure, you have a circulation problem, but I don't know why," the doctor said.

I wondered myself. So, he asked the hostess to give me a bottle of water and some fruit salad. I tried to take them in but without an appetite it was difficult to chew and swallow. My tongue was bitter. During this episode,

other passengers looked at me ominously and with piercing gazes as if I had a communicable disease. I looked at myself and thought, “You are all wrong. This is not swine fever disease.”

For the rest of the journey, I was in excruciating pain. At one point, I could not feel blood flowing in my legs. I was taken to the kitchen area where I laid my legs on a stool. After about thirty minutes, I was relieved when blood started to flow to the legs. But, other areas of my body were still on fire. This lasted for about four hours. And it felt like forever.

When we entered the U.S. airspace, I forced myself to eat some fruit cocktail. The doctor and the hostess said that, if my condition didn’t improve, they would call the ground for an emergency when we arrived at JFK airport in New York. In addition, the authorities would make plans to quarantine passengers in the plane for about 12 hours or so to ensure that I had not spread a disease. But I knew it was not swine fever because the disease had not been reported in Nigeria, and I had not visited any infected countries.

Miraculously, I was beginning to feel better – until the plane landed. I was wheeled from the aircraft to the immigration area and then to the reception. My wife was in the car with the children at the airport. We embraced, and I excused myself to quickly use the toilet. When I returned, I noticed a gloomy expression on my wife’s face.

“What happened on the plane? What caused your sickness? One of the passengers came to me while you were not here and said that I should take good care of you because you were very sick onboard,” Omolade asked in a barrage of questions.

I shook my head and wondered why bad news traveled so rapidly. I told her the whole story when we got home. That was on a Sunday. But I didn’t know the cause of the sickness, except the low blood pressure the doctor said he noticed. I took two tablets of paracetamol, a pain reliever. I also drank some lemon juice with Lipton tea. Over the years, this concoction and chloroquine, an antimalarial drug, had been my antidote for fever.

The following Monday, when I called the hospital to book an appointment, the receptionist told me that the next open availability with the doctor was three weeks away. I explained that I was very ill and she agreed to let me come around and fill some papers on Tuesday morning.

I got to the hospital before 8 a.m., although my appointment was for 9 a.m. However by the time I could finish the paper work, other patients who had appointments with the doctor had filled the clinic. I asked the receptionist when she thought it would be my turn.

“Lunchtime,” she replied offhandedly.

Lunchtime? That seemed like eternity to me. I drove back home in pain. I wanted to sleep, but the shivers and palpitations would not allow me. I became so dizzy that I nearly fainted. I was the only one at home because my wife had gone to the office, and the children were in school. I called my wife and told her I wanted to call for emergency service. Then I grabbed the phone and dialed 911.

The ambulance came about five minutes later. I walked into the vehicle unaided. After a couple of questions and note taking—age, medical history, etc—we left for the Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center, located at the corner of Linden Boulevard and Rockaway Parkway in Brooklyn. It was about 4.5 miles from my home.
I called the ambulance because of what my wife had told me some years ago about how hospitals treat some types of emergencies. Although I was ill, I knew that if I walked into the hospital by myself, it would have taken several hours before I would be attended to. By arriving in an ambulance I was sure I would get prompt attention, but I would still pay for the emergency service. But I was wrong. I was in the hospital waiting room for about two hours, sitting unattended in a chair. Then I remembered what else my wife had told me about emergency.

“The only emergency in the U.S. is a gunshot or blood gushing out from your body.”

I looked at myself—no gunshot, no blood. I might as well sit there forever. I beckoned to the nurse and told her I was queasy and weak. She asked me some questions and left. She returned later and gave me three tablets of Tylenol—a pain reliever, and water in a plastic cup. I swallowed the pills. Thereafter, I sat down for the next hour or so. By that time, I knew I had malaria fever. That was my self-diagnosis, and my prayer was that the nurse would attend to me on time and give me some antimalarial tablets because I knew it was a relapsing fever. I was sure that the monster would creep back before dusk.

Instinctively, I called my wife to bring me some Fansidar–an antimalarial drug.

After what seemed like forever, the nurse called me. From her accent, I knew she was Indian. After a series of questions, she concluded that I could be suffering from a malaria attack and would soon be checked into a ward. That's when my ordeal went from painful to unbelievable.

Everybody comes with assorted knives when an elephant dies – Yoruba proverb.

Many doctors, nurses and interns visited me, but not to offer assistance. They came because they had never seen a malaria patient. And they all looked at me apprehensively. I consoled myself. Was this real? Did I have a serious ailment?

I exhaled when they left and said to myself: "When a big embarrassment brings a man onto the floor, the little problems will climb on top."

As the news of my foreign ailment circulated around the hospital, my only comfort came from a Nigerian pharmacist who stopped by my room to offer reassurance.

"You know, don't worry about all the people coming. They have never seen a malaria patient in their lives," the tall man said. "And the news is spreading like wildfire in the hospital."

My wife brought the Fansidar tablets in the evening. I discreetly swallowed two of them since the hospital had not given me any medication. They had only taken my blood and urine samples, and until the test results were ready, I would be on observation only.

Two doctors came around 9 p.m. One was a white man and the other an Indian. They asked the same questions that others had asked me earlier.

“Where did you visit last?”
“What did you eat last?”
“Tell us about your medical history.”
“Do you vomit?”
“Do you sweat profusely at night?”
“How often do you eat?”
“Why are you so slim?”

The white man got closer to me, gave me this apologetic look, and whispered softly. “Just between you and me, how many sexual partners do you have?” He looked into my face and his colleague in turn.

“One,” I replied firmly, without hesitation. There was no reason for me to weigh the response.

“No, no, no, that’s not it,” said the Indian doctor, as he verbally shoved his colleague aside and slyly glanced at him. “You said you came from Nigeria this weekend.”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Have you ever had malaria attack?” the Indian doctor continued.

“Yes,” I said. “Several years ago.”

“When exactly,” the Indian doctor probed more.

“I can’t remember, probably 30 years ago,” I said.

“When last did you take any antimalarial drug,” the Indian doctor asked as he looked at me with authority.

“Maybe six months ago,” I responded with embarrassment.

“You know, you caused this embarrassment and unnecessary questions for yourself,” the Indian doctor said imperiously. “You should have brought chloroquine.”

I looked up, and thought how unlucky I was. I had been to the U.S. from Nigeria more than fifteen times in the past nine years, and this was the first trip I made to the country without bringing my travel medical kits, which contained chloroquine tablets.

That night, I was wheeled to a ward on the tenth floor and into a room where I was the lone occupant. A nurse gave me an intravenous drip, and I consumed three more drips before the next morning. Throughout the night, I was restless, half conscious, had fleeting dreams and felt powerless as a result of the power of the Fansidar tablets. After I had my breakfast, a nurse gave me three tables of chloroquine. I swallowed only one since I had taken the Fansidar tablets the previous day.

On Wednesday evening, a Jewish doctor stopped by and suggested that I take another type of drug. According to him, malaria parasites had developed resistance to a number of malaria medicines, including chloroquine. I refused. But that evening when my wife and children visited, I felt much better. Their presence was a great tonic.
On Thursday morning, a female doctor who had treated me the previous evening returned. I surmised that she was an Indian but without an accent.

“This floor is for patients with communicable and serious disease,” she said soothingly as she looked at my medical card on a clipboard. “Since yours is just malaria, we thought you should be discharged today and go home to get well. You shouldn’t come here with a minor illness and go home with something serious from other patients.”

She left. Immediately, I called my wife and asked her to pick me up. Omolade was happy. However, since she worked in Manhattan, she said she wouldn't be able to pick me up until after she left work.

While I waited eagerly for the hours to pass, I continued to ponder on the saga. The Indian doctor was right. I really should have brought chloroquine. When I was young, up until I was around twelve years old, my father gave me and my siblings Daraprim (pyrimethamine) an antiparasitic compound tablet, every Sunday. With the weekly treatment, we were protected from malaria attacks for many years.

On my hospital bed, I mused that the Indian doctor was, indeed, my savior. What would have happened if the white doctor had come alone? It's possible I could have been misdiagnosed. How many patients have endured a misdiagnosis? I was very lucky because I could have been a victim. Then I remembered a Yoruba proverb: *When it's not yet time for a sick man to die, Death will get him a good herbalist.*

Mobs and Mayhem

When the forest is ablaze, the antelope ceases to fear the hunter's bullet. - Nigerian proverb

Who set the Nigerian External Telecommunications (NET) building on fire? That was the question we were asking in January 1983.

I was a first-year student at the Yaba College of Technology (Yaba Tech) in Lagos. I was a few months old as a freshman and lived off campus with my parents at Ilasamaja in Lagos.

I had come for lectures on that sunny day in January. But that was not to be. The students had gathered in front of the Student Union (SU) building for a rally. The SU building was adjacent to the male hostels of the Higher National Diploma students, which was close to the female hostels, known as *Akata*.

As someone shouted, "Great Yaba Tech," the roar of excited voices filled the arena: "Greaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat."

A stout, bone-headed fellow then appeared in the window. He tried to work up the crowd, which was becoming agitated. "They are fascist, ultraconservative, neo-federalist and neocolonialist," he said. "The orgy of inferno, climate of arson, and circle of conflagration must end today."

He continued: "This is an uncivil nation, and we have to stop this destructive epoch and wrest our destiny from the political cartel."

As one speaker after another animated the crowd, with the clarion call "Great Yaba Tech," the crowd responded. "Greatttttttttttttttttttttttt."

"These are political wickedness in high places," said a fellow with a coarse voice. He was grotesquely attired with a black bandana on his head. "Let's break down this iron curtain of democratic unaccountability, political shenanigans and chicanery."

Another shrieked out from the balcony, “These are plundering, pesky political parasites.”

From the center window in the student union building, speaker after speaker talked about the breakdown of morality and what they described as “a decadent generation” and a “pariah country in the comity of nations.” In unison, they exclaimed: “the only solution to this perilous state is a revolution.”

Those were not the exact words spoken then, but it sounded like that in my ears—a student who had just finished secondary school education. I couldn’t really understand what the big vocabulary was all about. Yes, the razing of NET was despicable; and yes, the burning of the tallest building in Nigeria then was condemnable because it tied into a pattern of setting offices on fire after fraud had been perpetuated. On September 5, 1980, the 10-story Federal Ministry of Education building was burnt. On December 14, 1981, arsonist(s) set the Republic Building of the Ministry of External Affairs on fire. Two years later, it was the 37-story NET building. But what I couldn’t understand was the call by my colleagues for a revolution in the country. To me, it was like a needle was missing, and we had called a town crier to announce the loss.

What do students really want? I thought. I looked at my colleagues who lived on campus. On a typical day, with 50 kobo, they had two pieces of eggs, oats, six loaves and tea or coffee for breakfast at the cafeteria through government subsidies. For lunch, they had a sumptuous meal of chicken, rice and ice cream for 50 kobo. And a typical dinner was also rich–beans, plantain and two or three palm size meats—all for 50 kobo.

So what type of revolution do they want? Then I recalled what happened about five years earlier.

I was a student at Imota Grammar School in Lagos State. It was in April 1978 during the long term holidays, and I was returning from school to my home. The traffic was a gridlock when I got to Ketu. It was heavy as people trekked and vehicles stayed in the same spots for hours. What was the cause? I and other passengers in a commercial bus wondered. About two

hours later, our bus moved at a snail's pace for some minutes then stopped. And this happened again and again for several hours. When we arrived in Fadeyi, about five hours later, I was shocked. Here and there, I saw the charred carcasses of busses, overturned cars engulfed in smoke, and burning houses.

What was the cause of the destruction? The federal government had increased tuition at universities and higher institutions. So, the students protested peacefully. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was led by Segun Okeowo. That was the "Ali Must Go" episode. Col. Ahmadu Ali was then the Federal Commissioner for Education, while General Olusegun Obasanjo was the head of state. The military tanks were rolled out and the incident turned violent. The riot in Lagos was not the only one. There were also others in several parts of the country. In the end, ten undergraduates of institutions of higher learning had died.

"Great Yaba Tech," howled a speaker from the window as I was brought back to the present.

"Greeat Greatttttttttttttttt," thundered the crowd.

"We have reached the zenith of this kleptocracy. We have to march down on Babylon and take the stronghold of the Goliath," the pint-size speaker said. "Let's march to the National Assembly and rattle the legislators."

"How can President Shehu Shagari travel out of Nigeria to China when NET was on fire?" shouted someone from the crowd.

After more fiery and feisty talk, the procession started.

The National Assembly was in the Tawafa Balewa Square (TBS) then before it was relocated to Abuja following the official movement of the capital from Lagos to Abuja in 1991 by General Ibrahim Babangida.

At that time, the entire population of Yaba Tech was about 3,000 students. I don't know how many students joined in the protest, but it was massive.

We moved to the gate by the West African Examinations Council headquarters office, then into Herbert Macaulay Way, where we took over the entire road and made it impassable for vehicles. I imagined the commotion and the traffic chaos we had caused. One kilometer later, we were at the Yaba Bus stop, on the Murtala Muhammed Way, where many traders hailed us and praised us for standing up for the nation and the masses.

At the Nigerian Railway Zonal District Headquarters, Ebute Metta Junction, just by Adekunle Street, hordes of women came out from the row of bungalow houses, sheltered by tall trees. The women danced and waved leafy branches. And I said to myself. “Rebellion is sweet when women support it, and even sweeter when they start it.” I felt like a conquistador.

We moved on, chanting and singing.

Suffer suffer for World

CHORUS: Amen

Enjoy for Heaven

CHORUS: Amen

Christians go dey jab

CHORUS: Amen

“In Spiritum Heavinus”

CHORUS: Amen

Moslems go dey call

CHORUS: Amen

“Allah wa Akbar”

CHORUS: Amen

That was the music of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti from the album, Shuffering and Shmiling.

Five kilometers and about one hour after the procession started, we got to Iddo. All along we had been on the right traffic way. But at the Iddo Railway Terminus, we veered into the oncoming vehicles and moved into Idumota. As we moved, some of our leaders moved back and forth, advising us to prevent hoodlums from breaking into our ranks and joining the procession. We watched out but it was difficult to know who was who in such a mammoth gathering.

I cannot now recollect how we proceeded from Idumota either because of fatigue or because I was so engrossed in the rally. Anyway, I made it to Marina on the Lagos Island, from where I could see the profile of the NET building not far away.

The sun glared in the hot patchy afternoon when we arrived at the TBS—about 2½ hours and eleven kilometers or so since we left our campus. I was tired.

We entered the TBS through the west side pavilion. Immediately, I noticed the swarm of policemen, in full combat gear. They had taken strategic positions inside the TBS, and the entrance to the National Assembly complex. They had batons and AK rifles.

As we danced, chanted and sang, the atmosphere became charged.

Won ti'na bo'le o
Awon ole
Won ti'na bo'le

They've set the house on fire
The thieves
Have set the house on fire

After about ten minutes, some of our union leaders approached the leader of the police team. Both parties agreed that our union leaders should go into the National Assembly chamber to meet with the legislators to lodge our protests. So, our leaders left for the meeting.

In the absence of our leaders, the procession scattered. Some students went to the East side pavilion gate, along Macarthy street, to buy soft drinks and water to quench thirst; others gathered close to the High Court of Lagos annex by Moloney Street. I went toward the TBS shopping complex at the East pavilion. As I took the staircase, I thought about my parents' advice of never being part of any student protests and not to talk of being in the forefront. I was still engrossed in this thought when I suddenly went blank and blind. It started first with a pungent and peppery whiff, which hit my eyes and nose. I gasped for breath. The air was hot and smoky. I took in more air. It hurt more and my lungs pumped heavily.

"What, tear gas?" someone shouted.

There is no need to tell a blind man that the market has closed. The absence of the usual noise will pass the message. The police had fired tear gas canisters in many directions. We scampered as the sound of gunfire boomed in the air. I couldn't remember how many rows of stairs I jumped at once. And I have not run like that in my life again, never since then.

From a safe distance in a shop, some of my colleagues and I watched the policemen with horsewhips beat the unlucky students who couldn't escape. Most of the victims were ladies. And they received some very fine beatings.

About ten minutes later, the police retreated. Cautiously, we descended from our safe haven.

"Where are our leaders," a student asked in a cosmetic bravado. "Whey dem? Whey the policemen?" We just ignored the spineless rascal.

Our worry was how to get back to campus because we were tired and not ready to trek. And we got bad news that a student had been shot. As this

story filtered around, we were as angry as a rain-beaten cat. There was commotion on the street when we got to the TBS bus stop at the West pavilion. Buses went in the wrong direction; cars hooted uncontrollably; mothers and children wailed. Momentarily, some students hijacked the Lagos State Transport Corporation's (LSTC as it was then known) buses. Some of the drivers had abandoned their buses and fled.

So, I rode in a bus driven by a student. We sat down quietly, tired as we journeyed back to the campus. Frightened primary and secondary schools students and other passengers joined in the free ride.

We heard the good news when we got to the campus. The person shot by the police was not a student. He was a hoodlum and he belonged to a gang that was smashing car widescreens and snatching handbags from women. And he didn't die—the bullet had grazed his buttock.

For several days, my friends and I discussed this episode. Not the riot; but the vagabond whom the police hit on the butt. Why the buttock? Why not his leg? After all, hitting him on the leg would have demobilized him for that moment or for many months in the hospital thus preventing him from joining a fray to which he was not invited.

A friend conjectured that probably the police aimed at the leg but missed—an indication of a poor marksmanship.

Another surmised that maybe the police wanted to have a pound of flesh, adding that the best part of the body for such a robust meat was the behind.

We all agreed that hitting him in the leg would have been better. With a sore bum, the fellow would not be able to sit or lie on his back comfortably; he would probably have to remain on his feet. And you can't achieve perfect rest standing on your feet for long. This leads to restlessness. And restlessness begets more mischief.

The Tale of the Cow Tail

This is a story that my father once told. The purpose of the story is not to mock any church priest or pastor or man of God, but to show how greed has crept into the church and that the lofty office no longer gets the respect it deserves. It goes thusly:

Once upon a time, there was a big crisis in our church parish. The majority of the congregation no longer trusted the parish priest. His integrity was questioned as a result of his profligacy. In addition, members were uncomfortable with the manner in which his wife wielded power. They said she was arrogant and too flamboyant, as shown by her bleached skin.

So, the congregation mandated the parochial committee to visit the zonal headquarters and request the Zonal Vicar to remove our parish priest. Although my father was a member of the parochial committee, he didn't like this request, not because he supported the priest, but because he detested the schism and mischief in the parish.

Anyway, they went to Isolo in Lagos to see the Zonal Vicar—an old, witty septuagenarian, with a soft voice but firm resolve.

After referring to some verses in the bible, the Vicar spoke about the day the world would end. He also talked about the problems caused by man's obsession with money. He said he was neither surprised about what was happening in our parish nor in the entire sect. What surprised him, he said, was the extent of the greed, and the resulting moral and spiritual decadence in the church.

The Vicar said that the previous week, members of one of the parishes brought a very dispiriting case to him. The parish members were preparing for their yearly harvest celebration. As expected, members contributed money to cook food for the occasion, to provide a sumptuous feast for the entire church and guests. On the eve of the harvest, the church premises bustled with activities as caterers prepared elaborate meals and people moved soft drinks in crates, and crates into drums containing ice blocks.

In the evening, when the first batch of the food was ready, two women took some portions, neatly served in two beautiful porcelain plates, to the vicarage. They also took along some soft drinks. They met the priest, who sat majestically on a sofa in the living room.

The women placed the plates on the center table.

“Open the plates,” the priest said, with a frown in his eyes, as he gazed into the dishes.

The women opened the lids of the white plates.

“And where is the cow tail?” he asked anxiously.

“Which cow tail sir?” the two women responded in quivering unison.

The women knew that cow tail was a popular delicacy. Although it is mainly soft bones, it also contains muscles, tissue and skin. For some people, the cow tail is the most flavorful part of the beef stock. A long, slow cooking makes it tender and brings out the jelly like viscous liquid. Cow tail connoisseurs enjoy this culinary delicacy when prepared as spicy pepper soup. The tastiness evolves when the teeth crush the soft, bony meat into fine particles. The released juice swims on the tongue and tickles the palate. From there, it’s a smooth journey through the throat.

As the frightened women stood in front of the angry priest, they thought they had given him enough food; a full plate of jollof rice, and another plate filled to the brim with assorted parts of cow—fleshy thigh, tripe, neck, liver, among others.

Besides, the two visibly embarrassed women never knew the priest liked cow tail. The women were dismayed that the man didn’t even say thank you for what they brought and didn’t appreciate the painstaking efforts they had put into preparing the meal.

“This food is incomplete without the cow tail,” the priest said gloomily, pointing to the plates as the aroma of curry seasoning wafted through the room.

The women left. They told the chairwoman of the harvest committee what happened and the priest’s query about the cow tail. The chairwoman was furious. With a stern look, she dragged her heavy frame toward the vicarage. Everyone’s eyes followed her direction, and people wondered what she was up to. They knew her as a tough, firm woman—a character trait she developed through her military training. She was a senior soldier.

She swaggered into the sitting room and met the priest.

“Sir, I was told you wanted cow tail,” she asked with pretentious calmness, as she hid her two hands behind her back.

“Yes, oh yes,” said the priest dryly, reclining and readjusting himself on the sofa.

While he responded, the chairwoman flung a cow tail from behind. She swiped the priest’s cheeks with the cow tail from the right to the left, then from left to right.

“And this is your cow tail, and this is your cow tail,” the chairwoman said angrily.

The priest was stunned. He couldn’t speak or didn’t want to speak because something grayish, the size of a cashew nut had fallen from his mouth. It was a tooth.

My New York Experience:
How I Ate Like a King for $10

If we live long, we may eat an animal bigger than an elephant.
– Yoruba proverb

It was the year 2003. Coming from Nigeria where the per capita income was $25 a month, I thought that spending $20.03 for a lunch in a New York restaurant was scandalous. But $20.03 was the cost of a three-course "track lunch" at Michael Jordan's (a restaurant owned by the basketball star) at the Grand Central Terminal in New York City. By adding $5 to that amount, I could buy a 50 kg bag of rice in my home country. If my family of three ate rice once every day, the grain would last more than a month.

I entered the Grand Central Terminal for the first time in January. I was on my way to New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A., to register at Quinnipiac University for a master's program in journalism.
I was impressed by the grandeur of the eight-story terminal building. At the Park Avenue and 42nd Street entrance, a 50-foot high, group statue of Roman gods occupied the top of the terminal. Mercury stood in front of an eagle, flanked by Minerva and Hercules. The group statue, called Transportation, was designed by the French artist Jules-Alex Coutane. A 13-foot diameter clock, nestled among the figures, is the largest Tiffany glass clock face in the world.

Inside the terminal, the majestic 470-foot-long and 160-foot-wide Main Concourse was beautiful. Ten giant chandeliers dangled from the olive green, 125-foot arched ceiling. The ceiling, painted by the French artist Paul Helleu, shimmered with zodiacal constellations. The floor was Tennessee marble and the walls Caen stones. Two twisting marble stairways stood on the west and east wings of the hall. A giant opal face brass clock, which hovered above the information booth, stood at the center of the hall, while a huge American flag soared motionless at the center of the ceiling. The clock has been in continuous operation since the terminal was opened in 1913.

The constant flow of commuters and the cacophony of their voices, which turned into murmurs, were fascinating. Occasionally, a female voice sifted from the public address system.

“Attention please. Never leave packages unattended. Unattended items may be removed by the MTA police department. Thank you for your cooperation.”

I loved the interplay of nature and architecture as the sun pierced through three 75-foot arched windows at the east balcony. The rays of sunlight illuminated the floor, lighting up a stream of gray dust as the particles waltzed in harmony.

“If you want to have a good view of this area, you have to stay at either the east or west balcony where people are standing to take photographs,” said a black lady at the booth. I had asked her about the free tour of the Grand Central Terminal organized by the Guide Association of New York City.

As I moved from the information booth, an elderly white man in a blue, turtleneck shirt approached the cubicle. He asked the information officer about the track for the train to North White Plains. She replied that it was Track 42 and departure was 11 a.m.

I climbed the twisting, marble stairs to the west balcony. A young man focused a camera on the center of the hall, pressed the shutter, and paused as the flash bounced off the walls in the hall. He smiled and took another shot. This time, flashes from other cameras sparkled around. I looked to my left and saw the shocking menu board at Michael Jordan’s - $20.03 for lunch. I reflected on this for some moments. If Cornelius Vanderbilt, founder of the Grand Central Railroad, had been extravagant, he might not have started his business empire at 16 years old.

Vanderbilt got $100 from his mother to start the Staten Island Ferry in 1810. From his successful ferry business, a steamship line followed. At 70, Vanderbilt started investing in railroads and bought up small railroad companies in the New York area. He consolidated 35 of them into the New York Central Railroad. This terminal was the product of that $100 empire.

I decided that I would not eat at Michael Jordan's unless I hit a jackpot. Not that I couldn't afford the lunch. It's just that I had a moral qualm and no strong justification for spending such an outrageous amount on a lunch. But the more I wanted to discipline myself, the more I yearned and longed to eat at that restaurant. So, it became an obsession because I had never craved for any food like that in my life. Furthermore, it turned into a tormenting experience because I traveled to Connecticut three times a week to attend lectures at school, and I had to pass through the Grand Central Terminal. But fate, in the form of an anniversary, had another plan for me.

In October 2003, the terminal was 90 years old. The occasion was celebrated for five days from October 22 to 26. I was at the Vanderbilt Hall on October 25 for an exhibition on the historic terminal. The Vanderbilt Hall served as the main waiting room during the early days of the terminal. The hall and the main concourse were adjacent, both connected by a wide, arched passageway. Just like the Main Concourse, the floors of Vanderbilt Hall were Tennessee marble. Six gold and nickel-plated chandeliers hung from the ceiling.

A large-sized black and white cardboard effigy of Cornelius Vanderbilt and a friend stood at the entrance of the exhibition space. Fifteen blue cardboard posters, each about seven-feet high, were arranged in a semi-circle close to the lady's bathroom. Each poster had between six to nine photographs of the Grand Central Terminal. Some were in black and white, and some were in full color. Visitors silently moved around and gazed at the posters as if in a funeral procession. A Chinese man in a blue suit with red necktie crouched down in front of one poster and pulled out a camera from a black rucksack.

Click.

As I moved from one poster to another, the captions under each picture offered me insight and a clear understanding of the building's history, design and special features.
"Why are sculptures of rats prominent in the Grand Central terminal?" said one caption.

The answer: “Rats are symbols of efficient transportation.”

“What does the statue at the entrance of the terminal depict?” asked another caption.

“Mercury, the Roman god of speed, represents transportation and industry. Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, holds a globe, a scroll, a scribe (pen) and a book. She signifies knowledge and wisdom. Hercules symbolizes hard work and strength. He is surrounded by a sickle, sheaves and wheat, a beehive (the cog of industry), and a ship’s anchor.”

And so it went, caption by caption.

“Why are acorns and oak leaves etched at several places in the terminal?”

“Vanderbilt came from a poor family. In the past, wealthy people had a family crest. So, when Vanderbilt became rich, he made the acorn and oak leaves his family’s coat of arms to show a humble background.”

“How many commuters use the terminal every day?”

“About half a million people.”

“How many clocks are in the terminal?”

“A hundred and sixty clocks – seventy-five are in the public, while the rest are in various places away from public glare.”

A young Chinese girl, about 10 years old, brought my mind back to the scene. She pulled her mother along to a poster fitted with a television screen.

“Hey, they are showing the Secrets of Grand Central,” she shouted in excitement.

“How do you know it is the secrets of the terminal?” asked an elderly lady nearby. “We have the video at home,” she replied. “And, hey, that’s the …”

“We learn something new every day,” said the elderly lady as she faced the girl’s mother.

“It’s quite an experience. The Grand Central means different things to different people,” said the girl’s mother.

Silently, I agreed with her comment.

That day, I also finally tasted steak at Michael Jordan’s.

As part of the celebration, 18 restaurants in the Terminal gave visitors a special treat by allowing people to sample various foods and beverages with a $10 ticket. By 1 p.m., the lower level Dining Concourse was packed. An estimated 2,000 people crowded the area. The seats in the restaurants were filled and people had to stand to enjoy their meals. Many of them carried disposable trays as they moved from one restaurant to another. I flowed with the tide.

The aroma of savory food and coffee trickled to my nose. The warm fragrance of tomato sauce wafted from the Two Boots Pizza stall; the sticky smell of sauerkraut and mustard billowed from the Mendy’s Kosher Delicatessen booth, and the strong odor of garlic saturated the air around the Hale & Healey Soup stand.
I queued with other patrons at the Café Spice for potato samosas—a fried and soft cuisine filled with seasoned vegetables. Next, I collected a steak sandwich from the Central Market Grill and glided to the T’s Louisiana and to a restaurant called Geaux for some seafood gumbo and red rice with beef. I sat at Zaro’s Bread Basket booth and ate some of the samples in my tray. I even packed more in a plastic bag for home.
Later, I encountered another food sampler— Bob Alpert, a gray-haired, tall man with a stomach that was round like a barrel. As he stood on the corner, munching on fried chicken, he told me the treat was a pleasure, but he couldn’t care less about the terminal.

“When the Grand Central turns 100, come let’s talk about my opinion or history of this place because I will be 74 then,” said Alpert, a retired

construction worker from the Bronx. Nevertheless, he said he enjoyed the meals and hoped to come the next day for the closing ceremony.

Then I remembered why I came for the celebration.

I climbed the stairs to the west balcony. At Michael Jordan's, I got a palm-size sliced strip steak with creamed spinach on a garlic crouton. I sat down, bit a little and sipped some Michigan apple cider. And I said to myself: Happy 90th birthday, Grand Central.

For me, finally eating at Michael Jordan's was a victory of philosophical significance. It reinforced my belief that whatever your heart intently desires, your spirit shall restlessly seek until it gets it for you. Even if it's a mere craving for a slice of mutton, the building of a magnificent edifice like the Grand Central Terminal or an enduring business empire like Vanderbilt's—all that is required is an unflinching hope, followed by action. Life is hope. Hope is life.

My New York Experience:
The Subway Minstrel

Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.- Maya Angelou

Stephen John Dunckley plays a soundless music. Or so it seems in the busy and noisy setting of the Grand Central shuttle line in New York. On this day in March 2003, the 59-year-old Dunckley plays on a keyboard which sits on his lap, as he blows a trumpet, and swings his head at the same time. The white songster sports a clean, yellow T-shirt, grey pants, and silver-rimmed eyeglasses. He becomes serious with his performance as commuters step onto the platform. But his tune is drowned out by the roaring train.

Momentarily, another train approaches the station from 5th Avenue. Now, the trains flank the platform, while the musician is in the center. He is about six feet away from the coaches on both sides. As the trains throttle out of the station, jazz music fills the tunnel.

A motley crowd now gathers around the crooner as he performs “What A Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong. A petite, Asian woman snaps Dunckley’s photograph. Slowly, a young couple, holding hands, inches a little closer. The man disengages from his partner and puts a dollar bill in a dark-grey bag that Dunckley has placed on the floor. The man goes back to his companion, wraps his hands around her waist and kisses her on the lips. Meanwhile, trains continue to speed past, adding a background rumble to Dunckley’s music.

Dunckley is one of the more than 100 musicians who play in about 25 locations throughout the New York subway system. The music genres range from bluegrass to classical, Cajun, jazz, African, and South American. There are two groups of performers in the transit network—the Music Under New York (MUNY) members and the freelancers. There is a major difference between the groups. The Metropolitan Transportation Arts for Transit program, which coordinates the activities of artists in the subway,

gives permits to MUNY members to use amplifiers and perform at designated spots. The freelancers do not have such privileges.

Dunckley stops playing as the train departs the station. He picks up the bills from the bag and counts nine dollars. He has performed for twenty minutes and still has uncounted coins in the bag.

“This is a good day,” Dunckley tells a fan who has just stepped off of an escalator. The musician picks up a dollar coin, moves to a store about 30 feet away and purchases a bottle of Poland Spring water. He takes one large gulp.

Dunckley first played in the subway in 1984. Then, there was no rule on who played, where they played or how much they had to control their volume. Later, the transportation authority decided to inject sanity into the chaos by banning musicians from singing, jamming and rocking their instruments amid the hustle-bustle of the subway crowds. The performers challenged the move in courts, arguing that it was their constitutional right to play in the underground. They won in several rulings.

In 1985, the transportation authority introduced the MUNY as an organized group to control the situation. The rule requires musicians to audition before becoming a member. However, membership is not automatic; a panel of professionals decides who qualifies. Despite the regulation, non-MUNY members are free to perform in the subway.

Although Dunckley was a pioneer member of MUNY, he no longer belongs to the group because he feels the audition process has become far too political. Besides, he is not interested in playing in areas designated only for MUNY members.

Instead, he chose the tunnel, hoping to brighten the underground by sharing his unique, eclectic style of music with everyday commuters. For him, the greatest challenge is getting the audience’s attention within a short span of time. Trains arrive at the station almost every ten minutes.

Dunckley grew up in Queens, New York, but now lives in Manhattan. His interest in music started when he was 12 years old. By the time he entered middle school, he already was playing with a Dixie music group. But when he started college, his priorities shifted. Studies and other school-related activities prevented him from spending a lot of time with the band. Eventually, they stopped calling him for engagements.

“It was a sad story,” he says. “I had an electric keyboard that time. Alone, I was playing sad music on a sad keyboard.”

Then he found an escape hatch.

Dunckley’s younger brother advised him to combine playing the trumpet and keyboard simultaneously to gain more attention. He tried it and it worked. Dunckley remembers the day both of them went out to the Central Park to exhibit his new skills. While he was blowing the trumpet and playing the keyboard to a popular jazz tune, his younger brother jovially flashed a one dollar bill. He dropped it in front of Dunckley, picked it up, then dropped it, again and again.

“You know what my brother told me? Dunckley asks with a smile. “He said, ‘You are a genius.’”

He became a master of a one-man band.

Dunckley prefers playing on the platform because he can make more money at that site than at MTA-designated locations. On a good day, he actually takes in between $150 to $200. Admittedly, there’s not a lot of competition. Other musicians don’t like playing on the platform because of the roaring trains and the whirring air conditioners.

There’s also another drawback. Dunckley cannot use an amplifier. He whips out a New York City Transit leaflet containing the rules governing the conduct and safety of the public. Dunckley reads aloud the section that states that in no event will the use of amplification devices of any kind, electronic or otherwise, be permitted on subway platforms.

But the MTA allows some artists to use the amplifier in designated locations.

Peter Joseph Paul, a one-man rock band, can be found on the corner of 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue. He has two advantages in this location: an acoustic hall and an amplifier. The MTA permits the use of a loudspeaker in this area. With his long dark hair clipped at the back, the artist is singing a sentimental ballad and strumming an electric guitar, while using his feet to hit four drum-like devices.

“That’s *Too Far Gone* by Mick Jagger; it’s from his solo album,” Paul tells the audience when he ends the track.

Meanwhile, Dunckley is thrilling passersby with a medley of smooth jazz. A fan, who wants to invite him to perform at a private party, asks him where he gets his energy for performing. Dunckley spins around and points at the motley crowd as if to say, the subway commuters give him the energy to carry on.

His abundant “energy” and undeniable talent have led to an impressive CD collection of twelve songs—composed by him and other artists. Besides his gig in the subway, he plays in restaurants in New York and at private events. He says he enjoys performing at classy venues and dreams of one day moving to Miami, Florida, to form a big band and compose songs.

But, for now, his life revolves around his subway performances. Whenever he gets a free moment, he spends it with the loves of his life, his children. He’s divorced but has two beautiful girls, ages 24 and 12, from his two marriages.

Dunckley takes a short break and pulls out photos of his daughters and, for a while, seems to drift off. Then, the crowds begin to fill the subway again, and he gets back into his music groove. Tenderly, he glides his fingers across the keyboard as his lips caress the trumpet.

A train whizzes past, but he doesn’t see it. He is lost in the beat of a song.

Part Two

Beauty and the Bully

A happy man marries the girl he loves,
but a happier man loves the girl he marries. - African Proverb

Bashiru Obelawo was a small child, gifted with the wise soul of an oracle. At six years old, he thought and spoke like a 12-year-old boy. He understood death, cherished friendship and worshipped love. Most of these qualities were gained from the films he watched at the cinemas. Others were learned when he occasionally followed his father, a Bolekaja bus driver whose route included the regions of Yaba and Jankara. The Bolekaja bus, a transit vehicle made of iron, steel and wood, was pretty popular in Lagos up to the early 1980s. It had two swing doors and four long seats, two in the middle in which passengers sat in, back-to-back.

Obelawo had a hardened, almost unpleasant façade—sort of a steely look that made strangers regard him with fear. He had big eyes that roved like an owl searching through a dark, rain-drenched forest. He had a heart-shaped head, a big round nose, and a thick, drooping lower lip. His peculiar appearance made him a spectacle, causing touts, (individuals who hung around motor parks) to call him "*Alaye*," (a thug). And Obelawo had the biggest navel I had ever seen. It was round, soft and large as a ripe tomato. Often, the navel peeped out of his undersized shirt, no matter how well he tucked it in.

Obelawo was my best friend at the United African Methodist Church School, Eleja, Ebute Meta. We sat together on a two-seater wooden chair while he told exciting tales about life and the intrigues among his father's three wives, especially the youngest, Fali, also known as the scorpion. He amused me with stories of the films he had watched at Shiela or Glover Cinemas, and Sunny Ade's end of year music show at the Railway Recreation Centre at Ebute Meta. And he once told me that men don't cry, only boys do. He added that big boys don't even cry. He said that Amitabh Bachchan, an Indian movie actor, said so. Nothing made Obelawo cry, not even when our teacher, Mr. Ladega created a funny name for him -"Bonkolo."

Often, Mr. Ladega teased Obelawo and ridiculed him in a song that referred to his big navel. He would sing:

Bonkolo yi fuke fuke
Idodo e ri bolojo
Boya lo le gbe dodo mi
Ifuke, Ifuke, Ifuke

This Bonkolo is so comfy
And his navel looks lavish
But I doubt if it can swallow a fried plantain
So comfy, comfy, comfy

And the class would roar in laughter.

We never knew why Mr. Teacher Ladega enjoyed verbally bullying Obelawo. Maybe it was his cruel idea of humor or simply a way of engaging the class and making us laugh. But Obelawo and I didn't think it was funny. At lunch time, Obelawo ambushed any of our classmates who had laughed about his navel. At the cul-de-sac near the toilet, he knocked the head of such classmates with his knuckles.

It was also at the cul-de-sac that Obelawo sought revenge against anyone who taunted me. I was small in stature then, the smallest boy in my class. Because of this, some classmates called me "*Yanko*." And it was Shittu, alias *Ireke Obo* (the Monkey Sugarcane) who gave me that pet name. We called him *Ireke Obo* because he was lanky, skinny and shapeless. Whenever he called me Yanko, I always cried.

One day, Obelawo ambushed him at the cul-de-sac by the toilet.

"Why did you call my best friend an ugly name," Obelawo asked the terrified Shittu.

"I, I, didn't call him so," Shittu answered. "It was Bakare who called him something. I only laughed."

“So, you laughed when Bakare called him *Yanko*,” Obelawo said.

“I only laughed,” Shittu said, quivering.

“Okay, tell my best friend, ‘I’m sorry, sir,’” Obelawo said.

Shittu hesitated.

“Tell him, ‘I’m sorry, sir,’ or I’ll Yanko your head with my knuckles,” said Obelawo as he clinched his right fist.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Shittu said in tears.

“Say it loud,” Obelawo shouted.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Shittu said again, his voice quivering.

Many boys thought that Obelawo was a bully, but I didn’t think so. They avoided him during play at lunch time when we gathered at the long jump pitch, and fell on one another in the saw dust. The boys deftly avoided Obelawo when it was his turn to jump. He once fell on Sule (alias Borokini). Sule broke an ankle and was taken to the Igbobi Orthopedic Hospital. When he returned to school after four weeks, he compared the impact of Obelawo’s fall on him to being hit by a sack of beans. From then on, another sobriquet was added to Obelawo’s many monikers—Apo Ewa (the beans sack). And the more students who called him that, the more who had him “*chop more knuckles*” on their heads.

But everything changed the day Suki came to our school.

Suki was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She was an elegant Benin bronze who stood out in a crowd, even though she was only four feet tall. Suki had a stately step, a luminous smile, a body too shapely for her age and spotless skin. Always, she smelled as fresh as a new born baby (because of the baby lotion she used). Her most prominent feature was an aquiline nose. Because of her pointed nose, we called her Fulani Eko (the Fulani of Lagos). And the nickname was apt because her mother was from the Fulani

tribe of Northern Nigeria, while her father was Yoruba. Her father was a train driver who had traveled great distances across the country. In 1972, he was transferred to Lagos, and that's how Suki came to our school.

Suki liked me, but I didn't like her or, at least, I was ashamed to let the boys know that I liked her. The more I avoided her, the closer she wanted to be with me. She persisted, and we became closer–just childish closeness.

When we talked, she would tell me about her life in Jebba, a town surrounded by "big, endless water" in the middle part of Nigeria. She told me that fish were everywhere and that an Oyinbo man (a white man) named Mungo Park was buried there.

"Do you know that Dr. Nnandi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president, was born in Zungeru?" Suki asked me one day. "Dr. Azikiwe's father had worked there as a railway man."

"At Lokoja, the rivers Niger and Benue meet," Suki explained, adding that another area, Kaduna, was called the "city of crocodiles."

"Why is it so?" I asked, eyeing her nervously.

"I don't know, but I can ask my father," Suki replied softly. "And Jos is very cold. I've been there. And my father told me it's cold like London."

"Has your father been to London?" I asked.

"No. Is there a railway to London?" she asked me.

"I don't know. You may ask your father. He seems to know everything," I said.

Many of the places Suki told me about sounded like exotic lands. As we sat on the green grass under the breadfruit tree near the southern fence of the school, I liked how the cool breeze fanned our cheeks gently, and the way the sun shone on her thick, black hair.

Suki's presence created a gulf between me and Obelawo. It wasn't that I didn't like Obelawo any more and it wasn't that I liked Suki. It was just that Suki didn't like him, especially his rough play. So, she told me she wanted us to avoid Obelawo. But the more we wanted to avoid him, the more Obelawo wanted to be with us. Whenever Suki and I sat together to escape into our world of tales of those faraway lands or railway towns up North, Obelawo joined us. Often, he sat without saying anything, as he listened attentively to Suki and gazed at her sparkling eyes. Suki told me she liked it when Obelawo just sat quietly without blurting out anything stupid.

One day, Obelawo broke his silence. Suki had just told us that one of her neighbors in Zungeru always beat his wife. Later, the man sent her away and married her best friend. As Suki narrated this tale, Obelawo interrupted her.

"That was very cruel," Obelawo said. "You know what? I'll never raise my hands to beat a woman. I have this one life to live; I'll die for my best friend and live forever for my woman."

Suki stared at him for about ten seconds, shook her head, and rolled her eyes in amazement at his passionate declaration. For the first time, she smiled at Obelawo.

"My Yanko, what do you think about my neighbor?" Suki ogled me playfully, then nudged me gently on the left shoulder. Suki was the only one who called me Yanko without my being angry. Maybe because she added "my" to it.

"A man should never beat his wife," I said. "But why must a man leave his wife to marry another woman?"

"I don't know either," Suki said as she looked intensely into my eyes. I knew she was confused. Confused about what? Her look demanded a promise, a reassurance. A reassurance of what? I was too young to know.

Obelawo showed me his meaning of true and everlasting friendship one Tuesday, after lunch. Our teacher, Mr. Ladega, was writing on the

blackboard when Shittu belched. Instantly, we all laughed. Mr. Ladega looked back. For whatever reason, he went to Suki's chair, which she shared with Monisola. He asked Suki why she belched like a pig, thereby disturbing his teaching. Suki replied with a deep shake in her voice and vehemently proclaimed her innocence. Mr. Ladega stood his ground. He pulled Suki by the right ear and brought her to the front of the class. He went for his cane and whipped her backside with six strokes. As each stroke landed, she yelled, and tears flowed from her eyes. I cried. I looked at Obelawo. He didn't cry, but just shook his head. His eyes were misty and red.

Obelawo didn't talk to anybody for the rest of the day. He sulked. As we gathered at the close of the day, I knew he had something on his mind.

"I'll teach Mr. Ladega a lesson," Obelawo said as he patted the tattered rucksack that contained his books.

The following day, Mr. Ladega didn't come to school, and the next day after. He appeared a week later with a bandage around his head, tied like a turban. What happened? We heard that he was hit by a stone on his way home as he passed by the motor junkyard at Odaliki Street. At lunch time, Suki, Obelawo and I sat under the breadfruit tree. Obelawo told us he wanted to make a confession.

"I was the one who injured Mr. Ladega with a stone," Obelawo said. "I used a catapult."

Suki and I listened in disbelief.

"I picked a very secluded spot behind a trailer and waited and waited. Then Mr. Ladega finally appeared. I aimed for his head; I hit him. Then I fled as he shouted and held his head in his hands," Obelawo said gleefully.

"But why?" I asked.

"Because he beat Suki for what she didn't do," Obelawo said without remorse.

“But violence is bad,” Suki said as she winked at me.

“But the use of a cane is violence, too,” Obelawo said. “But I’m sorry now. I never intended to turn him into a Lemomu (Imam).”

And we laughed at this.

We kept the identity of the assailant secret among us. However, the new nickname for Mr. Ladega soon spread around the school. The students started to call him “Mr. Lemomu.” Suki was the broadcaster.

Twenty children cannot play for twenty years ─ Yoruba proverb

We graduated from the school in 1976. My family left the area and moved to another part of Lagos. I saw Suki and Obelawo no more.

I moved on with my life, grew up, went to higher schools, and got a very good job, with a promising career. But most of all, I married a loving woman. I minded my business, until a certain Saturday afternoon in July.

I was at the AP fuel station at Onipanu. I had just filled the tank of my brand new BMW. I was about to pull away from the station when I felt a sudden jolt in the seat. The sound created by the impact chilled my bones. My car was hit from behind. I got out and went to the backside. The bumper had sunken in, and the rear lights were shattered like a thousand strips of confetti. The driver of a commercial bus, also known as danfo, had hit me. He was stunned by the damage. I was furious.

“My father, please don’t be annoyed with your boy,” said the man, probably in his fifties, as he snorted and sweated profusely. He had copious gray hairs.

I didn’t respond, but my blood boiled.

“Ah father, I know it’s my fault, but I beg you in the name of God. We can get a panel beater nearby to push out the bumper. It’s only the rear light, oh.

Ye, my God," the man said as he gestured to the broken pieces of glass on the ground.

I still didn't utter a word.

By that time, the bus passengers and passersby had started to gather around. Some begged that I should forgive the old man. I looked straight into his pleading eyes. He stared back, then closed his eyes. At that instant, the silly man unbuttoned his blue shirt and exposed a tennis ball-sized navel.

"Obelawo," I shouted.

"Yanko, Ehn, our Yanko," Obelawo screamed.

We embraced. It had been 36 years since we had seen each other. We held tightly for about 30 seconds, oblivious to the people around us. As we let go, the crowd looked at us in surprise. They were probably disappointed at how the story turned. Maybe they had expected a fight. In that case, it was an anticlimax. We moved our vehicles to the car park at the filling station to avoid obstructing the flow of traffic at the pumps.

Obelawo told me he lived close by, along Bajulaiye road and asked if I was free to come along to his home. I immediately said okay.

"I have a surprise for you," Obelawo said.

"What surprise?" I asked.

"A man to whom we are bringing a new wife should not eagerly look through the window," Obelawo said.

I wondered what the surprise was.

"Ehn, Ah, Kekere Ekun, take the bus to the car wash and bring it home," Obelawo shouted at his conductor, as he threw the key to the young, scruffy chap. "I'm going home with my best friend in the whole wide world. And don't use the bus to start picking up prostitutes. I don't know whether

you've been cursed with the curse of women. All your life is to chase women."

"Ah Baba. It's not like so, oh. They are the ones chasing me," Kekere Ekun responded gleefully.

"I'm sorry for your family. That's the trade you've chosen in your life," Obelawo retorted. "Running after shameless young girls, and even old women who are old enough to be your mother. Just bring the bus home after the washing. I'm expecting it very soon oh, or I will whip your backside this evening."

As we drove to Obelawo's home in my car, he apologized for the harsh words he had used on his conductor. He noted that those garage boys needed strong hands or they could send the bus owner to an early grave.

Along the way, my mind was focused on the surprise Obelawo said he had for me. I also wanted to ask a few questions, and I wondered whether he had seen Suki since we left primary school.

Soon, we arrived at a self-contained, two-bedroom bungalow that belonged to Obelawo. His family lived in the front part of the building, a large compound with well-kept green lawns. Pawpaw trees dotted the landscape– all planted in a tidy row around the fence. Here and there, hibiscus flowers were in bloom.

I entered the living room. The sweet smell of lemon air freshener caressed my nose as Obelawo offered me a seat on the double-seater sofa. Suddenly, I was struck by a 10- by 12–inch, black and white photo on the gray wall, displayed by the television set on a well-polished wooden cabinet. No doubt about it, that was Mrs. Obelawo in an attractive nurse's uniform. I thought the white cap sat regally on her head. My eyes traveled to another black and white photograph about five inches away. I recognized Obelawo with eight young children; one of them sat on the lap of the wife. I wondered about the woman in the photographs—she looked familiar.

Obelawo seemed to have read my mind.

“Oh, those are the children,” Obelawo said. “Two are medical doctors, one is a lawyer, one an engineer. The others are schooling abroad.”

Although I was happy about the progress of the children, my interest at that moment was the woman in the photograph. “Could it be?” I thought. I was immersed in this thought when the door to the living room opened gently. A woman, about five feet eight inches tall entered. A white towel was tied firmly around her, from her chest to her knees. She had exited the bathroom and was walking across the flat. I stared, and my eyes landed on her well-chiseled face and then on to the neck. I looked again at the pointed nose.

She gazed at me with bright eyes.

“My Yanko,” Suki screamed

“Fulani Eko,” I yelled.

“How did you find me?” Suki asked, as she rushed into my spread arms. We embraced. She laid her head gently on my shoulder. I smelled the scent of baby lotion, which was her trademark from our primary school days. She held me so snugly that I felt the pulse of her heart. We stood there in warm embrace. When we let go, tears glided along her round cheeks. Why the tears? I thought. What caused the tears?

“Motherhood has not tainted your beauty,” I said.

“My Yanko,” Suki said coyly. She excused herself from the room and went to the bedroom which was to the right of the TV set.

Obelawo then filled me with the rest of the story.

After our primary school education, Obelawo’s father died, and he became a full-time bus conductor and later a driver since he had no one to sponsor his education. Shortly after, Suki’s family moved to Kano following her father’s job transfer to the area. Two years later, Monisola, Suki’s best friend in primary school who also then lived in Kano relocated to Lagos.

One day, she boarded Obelawo's bus. After the two chatted awhile, Monisola told him that Suki lived in Kano. Obelawo got Suki's address and traveled to Kano the next day. Suki, who was a student at the Federal Government Girls' Secondary School at the time, was quite surprised to see Obelawo. They renewed their friendship, and Obelawo visited frequently. However, when Suki's father heard about the "rascal boy" from Lagos who was seeing his daughter, he opposed the friendship on the grounds that she was "too refined to be seen with a bus boy." Not long after, Suki became pregnant by Obelawo. Her father was shocked. He disowned her and sent her out of the house. Obelawo gladly accepted the pregnancy and brought Suki to Lagos, where they have lived happily ever after. (Obelawo had since reconciled with his in-law.)

Momentarily, Suki ambled in wearing a white shirt and a blue skirt.

"So, Obelawo, you ran away with our boyhood trophy," I said.

"It was dangerous to leave such a gem in the open for so long. Wolves would gorge her," Obelawo said as Suki walked to him, sat on his lap, and kissed him passionately on the lips.

"And since we married, it's been forever pleasurable," Obelawo said. He looked into Suki's eyes and their lips again entangled.

"And what's more, he has never caused me a needless tear," Suki said cheerfully. "And even when I cried, they were happy tears."

As I drove home after the visit, I slotted a compact disc into the music player and found the track, "The Colour of My Love," by Celine Dion. As Celine's soft voice tickled my soul, I was elated that my dearest wife was also earnestly waiting for me at home. I listened to the song:

> I'll paint my mood in the shades of blue
> Paint my soul to be with you
> I'll sketch your lips in shaded tones
> Draw your mouth to my own

I'll draw your arms around my waist
Then all doubt I shall erase
I'll paint the rain that softly lands on
Your wind-blown hair

I'll trace a hand to wipe your tears
A look to calm your fears
A silhouette of dark and light
While we hold each other oh so tight

I'll paint a sun to warm your heart
Swearing that we'll never part
That's the colour of my love

I'll paint the truth
Show how I feel
Try to make you completely real
I'll use a brush so light and fine
To draw you close and make you mine

I'll paint the sun to warm your heart
Swearing that we'll never part
That's the colour of my love

I'll draw the years all passing by
So much to learn, so much to try

And with this ring, our lives will start
Swearing that we'll never part
I offer what you cannot buy
Devoted love until we die

And I reflected on this thing called love. What is love? Is love an intangible field of energy that pulls you to your desire? How powerful is this force? Can you resist it? If yes, why yes? If no, why not? Is love a tyrant? If you cannot resist it, why is it that when you no longer love what you had loved, you are able to pull yourself away? Are there two forces pulling in both

directions, allowing love to exist? In other words, for love to exist, as you pull toward your desire, your desire must also pull toward you. The point at which you both meet is the equilibrium of love.

At the primary school, ours was a triangle of relations, not love. We were too young for love and too naïve to understand its mysterious power. However, I now believe that there was a force that we couldn't comprehend back then—a force that peered far into the future. A force that rewarded those who toiled, sweated and suffered for what they desired.

Suki knew who she wanted, and that was me. Obelawo yearned for no one else but Suki. I, whom Suki wanted, wasn't sure what I wanted. Hence, I never pulled. Only Suki and Obelawo exerted the force and tapped into its potential. So, it's only natural that Suki and Obelawo would be rewarded, for they allowed the unseen magnetism of love to pull them together. That same power turned a schoolyard bully into a tender husband. Love is a phantom.

It's a Woman's Thing

Character is beauty. And good character is the best adornment.
– Yoruba proverb

After 38 years of blissful marriage, Adesoji could no longer bear it. He finally snapped on that warm Saturday morning. He and his wife, Fadekemi, had a wedding to attend in Ibadan, Oyo State. Adesoji had awakened early to start preparing for the 90-kilometer journey to Ibadan from their home in Victoria Island, an affluent neighborhood in Lagos. As in the past, Fadekemi had been adorning herself—makeup, fine clothes, and elaborate jewelry—for the past 30 minutes. For Adesoji, this seemed like forever.

"Fadekeeeemiiiii," shouted Adesoji, as his voice filled the big family sitting room.

"Darling, darling," Fadekemi replied with a calm and playful tone.

"Woman!" Adesoji boomed in anger.

Instantly, Fadekemi knew something was wrong. Her husband wouldn't call her by any other name, except Fadekemi or honey.

Adesoji is a simple-minded and reserved man. He is tall and heavyset with a broad face, and sprinkles of gray hairs. He generally arrays himself in a simple white guinea brocade robe and trousers, with a blue damask cap.

He fidgeted with the car key, and left the room for the car park downstairs. As he descended the spiral staircase in the duplex home, his mind went back to 40 years ago when he returned from England to Nigeria after graduating from the medical school. He had gone to see his friend, Omobolaji, at Sandgross, in Lagos Island. Omobolaji had invited him to his birthday celebration. At the party, Adesoji spotted this young woman, probably in her early twenties, seated alone about 30 feet away. She sported a well-plaited "*shuku*" hairstyle and wore a congenial smile. Her soft countenance and angelic eyes captivated Adesoji.

As the music of I. K. Dairo from the track “Salome” boomed from the loud speaker, Adesoji approached the charming woman. The song was a love ballad in praise of Salome, a beautiful, alluring, ebony woman with a regal presence. Adesoji asked her for a dance. She accepted. Two years later, he married her.

Fadekemi loved to look good, well-kept and groomed. For her, beauty was both internal and external, and she wasn’t about to allow old age to lead her to a sloppy appearance. Although she wasn’t an extravagant spender, she had a very good sense of style, and always took her time to ensure she looked her best for any outing. And that had been the cause of the minor argument with Adesoji.

Adesoji opened the door to his Mercedes—one of the four cars in the garage. He switched on the engine. Still very angry, he left the key in the ignition and went back into the house. Fadekemi was still in the bedroom.

Adesoji looked at the gold Rolex watch on his wrist, and his eyes traveled to the wall clock. He became more agitated.

“Womannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn,” Adesoji shouted in a deeper timbre voice.

“Olowo ori mi (my master); I’m on the way,” Fadekemi said softly and apologetically as she stepped into the sitting room. She looked taller than her five feet nine inches because of her good carriage. Her head, shoulders and back were upright, and she walked with the grace of a ballet dancer. She held a brown leather Gucci handbag, and the smell of her Chanel No. 5 perfume filled the room.

Adesoji looked at her with a stern face.

“Ah darling, how do I look?” Fadekemi said. Her cheeks and chin glowed, and she looked lovingly at Adesoji. “Is the headgear well tied? I thought I couldn’t get the right twist that I wanted.”

Adesoji said nothing.

“Darling, wouldn’t you say something?” Fadekemi said affectionately.

Adesoji was silent.

“Okay, I’ll go and tie it the way you’d like it,” Fadekemi said, as she looked toward the master bedroom.

“Woman!” Adesoji hollered as he looked at her, then dropped the car key on the ornate wooden stool to his right. His cap followed, and he sat down on the three-seater sofa.

“Aha, darling, are we not going again,” Fadekemi inquired. She couldn’t understand why Adesoji took his seat. She started to praise Adesoji, extolling his family’s ancestral values and power.

> “*You are the son of the elephant who inherited his grandeur*
> *In your great-grandfather’s home, slaves never slept on mats*
> *The servants of your ancestors slept on beds stuffed with fine ostrich feathers*
> *Your father never coveted honour*
> *But prosperity flung itself on his footstool*
> *It begged to be courted in your household.”*

Adesoji didn’t respond as he remained transfixed on the settee with a melancholy look that Fadekemi had never seen him wear. His eyes traveled to the family group photograph on the wall. It was taken about 27 years earlier, shortly after the birth of their first child—a girl, who inherited her beauty from Fadekemi. Another photograph was close by. It showed Adesoji, Fadekemi, Aderonke, then 10 years old, and her young brother, Aderinkomi, and sister, Aderiyibi.

Fadekemi jolted him back to the present.

“What’s the matter, my prince?” she asked soothingly. “Is it because I had taken long to dress up for this event? Is it?”

Adesoji didn't allow her to finish. "A farmer who doesn't want his farmland to be used as a thoroughfare must one day stop the trespassing," he said. "Look, I don't understand these unnecessary delays. I mean, who are you really trying to impress, or whose attention do you crave? Who's interested in the charm of a 58-year-old grandmother?"

"Aha," Fadekemi replied sucking a fresh breath of air as she stared devotedly at Adesoji. "Today is the harvest of words. The reply is ripe today."

"Eeehn," a surprised Adesoji said.

"Now you asked, after nearly turning me into an old cargo, though I've refused to be made so, who am I trying to charm?" Fadekemi said, as she dropped her clutch bag on the center table.

Adesoji cringed and removed his shoes from his feet.

"Okay, you want to know," Fadekemi continued. "Dressing well makes me feel good. It brings an inner joy that words alone cannot express. It gives me that kick of life. It's all about the dignity of womanhood. Taking time to dress well is a women's thing and men don't seem to get it."

"Hunnnnnn," Adesoji muttered in a soft, excited tone.

"But most of all, it's all for you, my prince," Fadekemi said. "It's the best way for me to show the world that you have a very good taste for beauty; that you know how to take care of your wife, and that I continue to blossom graciously in your house."

Adesoji exhaled softly, and he felt the anger evaporate from within. But he was still speechless.

"My Darling with a capital D, my everlasting. The ground on which I stand is yours. The grass on which my horse grazes and tumbles is also yours, " said Fadekemi tenderly as she knelt down in front of Adesoji.

“Alright,” Adesoji said. He embraced her, but didn’t make any move to get up.

“I think we can go now before the heavy traffic at Oworonsoki starts,” Fadekemi said.

Adesoji ogled her in disbelief. “We are no longer going. But I’ve forgiven you, and I’m no longer angry. Okay?” Adesoji said calmly.

“Forgiven me?” confused Fadekemi said. “And yet you don’t want us to go out. So, I’ve wasted the 50,000 naira for this *aso oke* (garment) and the new bag to match.”

Silence.

“So, we will stay at home to do what?” Fadekemi said with teary eyes.

“Oh, we’ll stay at home to do nothing,” Adesoji said imperiously, waving his hands in the air.

“Then we will turn that nothing to something,” said Fadekemi, as she grabbed his flowing robe.

“What?” Adesoji said, as he didn’t anticipate her bold reaction.

“Maybe today is when you will give me what I last demanded from you about 27 years ago,” Fadekemi said with smile.

“What gift?” a confused Adesoji asked.

“What gift? Okay, let’s go inside the bedroom. That’s where we can begin to make the child of my old age,” Fadekemi said. “A child that I can talk to and play with since I no longer deserve your attention.”

Fadekemi stood up and planted a warm kiss on Adesoji’s lips. They embraced, and he felt the tenderness and touch that could melt even a stone

heart. Fadekemi gently placed her head on his broad shoulder and found peace. She wouldn't let go as Adesoji tried to free himself from her.

"Aha, you want the whole world to accuse a virile 68-year-old man of lovingly killing a 58-year-old grandmother?" Adesoji said, as he dislodged himself from Fadekemi.

"That's not a new tale in the world," Fadekemi said seductively, as she tried to wrap her arms around him.

Adesoji moved nimbly to the left.

"Where did I put the car key, oh the car key," Adesoji thought aloud, slipping on his black Geoffrey Bailey shoes. "Please, let's go to the party."

Fadekemi stood, arms akimbo, and pretended that she didn't hear what her husband had just said.

"What about a sweet kiss for the road," Fadekemi said teasingly through half-parted lips.

"Fadekemiiiiiiii," Adesoji said, as he grabbed his cap, picked up the car key, and ran toward the door. Fadekemi followed on his heels.

Palm Wine, Women and Gossips

It walks into the village silently at sunrise, and there is wild jubilation at sunset (A praise to palm wine)

At Biyan village, people still wake up to the call of the cock crow. Dogs still wander around with their puppies, hens still roam with their broods, birds still chirp gleefully on trees, and little boys and girls still saunter around naked. The women joyfully fry *garri* at courtyards, while the men cherish the farm or the hunt for game in the thick forest.

Biyan is close to *Abalabi* village on the east and *Eiye Fo'do* on the west, in the *Omi Adio* area of Ogun State. It's a settlement where everyone knows everyone. The houses are built of dull, red mud with thatched roofs. A long footpath runs along the village leading steeply down to the slow, noiseless Ibere River.

At Biyan, humor or rumor help to maintain harmony, and the friendly banter at the palm wine bar have kept the people together for ages. In the morning, the village is quiet and serene—a contrast to the boisterous evening when everyone returns home. Close to the baobab tree in the center of the village is a bamboo shed with a thatched palm frond roof. The shed is located along a narrow sandy path surrounded on both sides by guava trees.

This evening, as it's been for so many years, the men gather at the shed, owned by Lugo, the palm wine tapper. After the day's work, they often come to enjoy fresh palm wine, the mildly intoxicating and sweet liquid whose sap is collected from the cut flower of a palm tree. They sit in a circle on the knee high bamboo log placed on bifurcated trees. As the men enjoy the drink, they joke and gossip about everything under the earth.

Balu, a burly man with a melancholy look, is in his early sixties. He is, undeniably, a happy man. Life at the palm wine shed revolves around him

because he has many tales to tell. He has traveled far and wide, enjoys good music and his home is full of troublesome women. He has five wives and enjoys nothing better than collecting women as trophies. People say he has been adequately compensated by the gods because he has fifteen children—all female. Two of the girls by Ariyike, his fourth wife, neither resemble Balu nor Ariyike. Why? Balu and Ariyike are not gap-toothed. The rumor is that the children belong to Obojo, the only gap-toothed man in Biyan.

Oreke, the wife of Lugo, pours palm wine into the calabashes. Oreke is tall, stoutly built, with a rising and falling backside. She has flashing, black eyes and a charming, broad smile. She also has a caustic tongue and her raw talk has endeared her to the men, especially when she takes on Balu. Oreke has eight children, and nobody has ever doubted their fatherhood.

Balu pulls the tip of Oreke's wrapper, drawing her to his side as if he wants her to pour some palm wine into his cup. His eyes travel to the U-shape neck of Oreke's native attire which reveals her well-rounded bust. Balu launches into the song of Ayinla Omowura and how the Apala music maestro seduced a married woman who had a beer bar in Abeokuta. In a bluesy voice, Omowura admonished the husband for allowing his beautiful wife to sell beer.

Eni fe iyawo arewa
To gba fun koma ta oti

Chorus
Maigida oh, Maigida oh
Iyawo t'aba fi si'po aye jije e je o ja'ye

E fi faari si won nigba
E fi oyaya si won lorun
E tun nga'run, e tun nga'mu

Chorus
Maigida oh, Maigida oh
Iyawo t'aba fi si'po aye jije e je o ja'ye

A man who marries a beautiful woman
And allows her to own a beer parlor

Chorus
Master of the house, master of the house
A wife whom you placed in the midst of pleasure
Should be allowed to indulge herself

You put pride into her stock
And cheerfulness on her neck
Yet you are watching her every step

Chorus
Master of the house, master of the house
A wife whom you placed in the midst of pleasure
Should be allowed to indulge herself

All other patrons know that Balu always refers to this song to irk Lugo, who watches the action going on through the window of the bar from where Balu flirts with his wife. Lugo is bow-legged and the joke around the village is that the legs are good gift from the gods to enable Lugo to conveniently wrap his body around a palm tree and easily tap palm wine. Indeed, he can climb a palm tree faster than he can walk on land.

Lugo was born in Biyan village, but when he wanted to marry, he went to Ayede village, about 70 miles away. He married Oreke, one of the most beautiful girls in the province. The rumor is that Lugo used *juju* to marry Oreke because there was no way a beautiful girl like her would willfully marry a "crooked-leg," palm wine tapper. Another rumor was that Lugo had laced Oreke with evil charms known as *magun* to ensure that she would remain faithful to him.

Balu lifts his calabash tenderly and spills a small amount on the ground as a sign of respect to the ancestors. He then touches the spilled liquid on the ground, touches his forehead and mutters some prayers. Everybody say Amen.

“I’ll tell you the secret of a successful polygamist,” Balu says, as he sips some palm wine and swirls it in his mouth. “All the wives must hate one another. And with that they will crave the love of the man.” He sips more foamy liquid from the calabash.

“For what does a man need many wives?” Obojo interjects. He is the same age as Balu. The talk in the village is that he has been cursed by the god that no woman should ever live with him. He has been married thrice, and his three wives from another village visit him occasionally.

“Well, you will know in old age why a man needs many wives,” Balu responds with an antagonistic glare. “And you may want to know why I’m more prosperous than you. You, a wretched hunter.”

“What has my wretchedness got to do with a man who cannot get peace in his home?” Obojo replies. “Rather than an abatement of her viciousness, a witch gives birth to only female children and witchcraft multiplies.”

“Today, I will tell you what you don’t know,” Balu says with an earnest face.

“What message can we get from the son of a poor wood hacker who books an appointment with a white man for three o’clock?” Obojo says.

“When the guinea pig is old, it suckles the breasts of its children,” Balu says, provoking a wild laughter from the patron. “These daughters will provide money for me through dowries in my old age. And what will you fall on Obojo? What will you fall on but wretchedness and loneliness?”

“You may as well start sucking them right now,” Obojo says. Then he waits for some moments in deep thought as he reflects on what he just said. “Ehn, Ehn, don’t tell me you are even sleeping with—abomination.”

All along, Ashafa who sits across them has been quiet, but he cannot take it any longer. He is a sincere, calm, and introspective man. Ashafa, Balu’s best friend, has been happily married to Abebi for about 35 years. Ashafa is also blessed with prosperous children—two sons and a daughter. Akobi, his

first son, is a successful cocoa trader in Abeokuta. The second son is a banker in Lagos, while his daughter is the wife of the richest timber merchant in Sokori village, about 100 miles from Biyan.

The villagers are proud of him and always remark that his association with Balu has torn apart the wise saying that a bad company corrupts good manners. He is noted for his native sagacity and witty sayings. One of his favorites is: “A man who marries one wife marries one pleasure, when he marries two that becomes double problems.”

“You don’t appreciate a woman’s beautiful hair by the eyes, but by word,” he often says. “In other words, compliment a woman who has taken the time to put on a beautiful hairdo.”

And another is, “On the day your wife cooks a new soup, you must have an appetite to eat. This is to appreciate her efforts in preparing the food.”

He has been a teetotaler for the past 30 years and only comes to the palm wine shed to enjoy the company of friends and hear their tall tales. He has found out that the best dreams are not made when a man is asleep, but when drunk.

Oreke goes round and slowly stirs the gourd, shaking the content to mix well. The patrons burst into a song, rendering it with deep modulation, as they sway from side to side.

Mba ti laya keregbe ni o je o he
Ojo toro, emu ni
Ojo sisi, ogogoro
Ojo mo ti’memu, o ni gbese o ya ile mi

I would have married but for the gourd
When I have three pence, I spend on palm wine
And when I have six pence, it’s for the local gin
However, since I have been drinking a creditor has never visited me

Balu burps, drawing wild laughter from everyone.

“Since I have been drinking, Oreke has never visited me,” Balu interjects, smiling mischievously.

Another uproar from the patrons. Oreke hisses and goes back into the hut.

“You’ve diluted this palm with water and added saccharine to sweeten it,” Balu says. “I will not pay the full amount today, oh.”

The moon is now full, and the men have spent about two hours at the pub. The effect of the palm wine is soon apparent in their manners. Their moods start to shift from jovial to verbose. Their true conduct and inner thoughts begin to unfold. Oreke returns to serve more palm wine. Balu continues to render Ayinla Omowura’s song, Omuti ki s’apa (beer drinkers are not prodigal).

Fati ni e o gbodo ma binu mo
Esuru yin sohun lo towo yin bo epo
E o gbodo ma binu mo
Esuru yin sohun lo towo yin bo epo
Eni to ri’ko ikun nile to lo gbin epa
Ko to ki a wi fun
O ti mo pe ikun a je ti e nibe
K’oloko to de

Chorus
Maigida oh, Maigida oh
Iyawo t’aba fi si’po aye jije e je o ja’ye

It’s a fact, so you need not be angry
It’s your potato that dipped your hands into the palm oil
So you need not be angry
It’s your potato that dipped your hands into the palm oil
A person who sees a farm inhabited by squirrels
But goes ahead to plant groundnuts
Needs no further advice

He should have known that the squirrels would have their full
Before the farmer comes along

Chorus
Master of the house, master of the house
A wife whom you placed in the midst of pleasure
Should be allowed to indulge herself

"You know, I'll go to the end of this world to get the black charm to seduce you," Balu says drowsily. His steamy eyes linger solicitously on Oreke's face. "I, I, swear, that is the last wish and my prayer from Yemoja, the goddess before I die, I dream about it every day, every day."

"That's a dream from which you will never wake up, and which will never come true," Oreke says in a vivacious voice. There's a spark in her eyes and her arms are akimbo as she sways her body in a circle.

"Okay, make sure, sure, you don't walk alone in the shadow of the night in this village again, I mean again, or I will bundle you into my house," Balu says. "And then I'll tell my most senior wife, what's her name again ooh, to lock you, eh, inside for three days. You will enjoy what I will give you that you will forget Lugo forever, I mean forever."

"If one says that a masquerader will pursue a man from the corn farm, then it can never be a scarecrow," Oreke says. "If I'm locked in the same room with you for just one minute you will never come out alive."

Everybody roars with laughter because Balu has met more than his match.

"Ehn, *magun* woman. I have forgotten," Balu says as he shakes his head. "The Englishman's dog is pretty but not good for hunting. Oreke is beautiful but lacks good manners. She has a viper's tongue. Very strong-headed like a he-goat."

"With a woman like Oreke, I don't mind manners," Obojo says, his eyelids round and lively. "All I want is to take her out, to flaunt."

“That’s where you are deadly wrong. Beauty alone is not what makes a woman,” says Balu.

“Don’t be fooled,” Obojo says. “Beauty is all that counts. If a woman is beautiful outside and lacks manners, what men see on her face will always cloud what she lacks inside.”

“I think the palm wine has started to eemm, cloud your thoughts,” Balu says. “You must never marry a woman because of outward beauty only. Both inner and outward beauty are important, character counts.”

“Give me a beautiful woman who lacks character like Oreke first, and I will hammer the manners into her head later,” Obojo says. “And what is needed is patience.”

“And if she refuses to be molded?” Balu responds.

“Aha, I will nail manners into her thick, fat head every day, until she gets the message,” Obojo replies.

“Now I know why no woman ever stays long under your roof,” Balu says.

“And what about you whose stable is full of them?” Obojo replies dryly. “We can see how you have put your house in order.”

“Oh, oh, you have started again. You spineless pimp,” Balu says, his mouth twitched with anger.

“Ah, Ah,” Ashafa interjects, “Can’t you two give peace a room?”

“It’s not me. It’s this fellow whose manhood has withered,” Obojo says.

“What do you call me?” Balu asks, as he looks at Obojo with a half sneer.

Obojo hesitates for a second, then answers in quick indignation. “I’m not a broken record that keeps on repeating itself.”

“Then you want to hear a tale from an angry man today. You will hear it since you’ve pulled a wild animal by the tail,” Balu says. He stands up with a clenched fist as veins of anger swell on his forehead. “Ashafa, tell him what happened many years ago when we went hunting, and you pulled a wild animal’s tail.”

Ashafa remains calm and doesn’t react. Balu persists. And then, Ashafa notices the mischievous smile and wink of Balu’s right eye and realizes that his friend is not angry but in a jovial mood. Ashafa gleefully narrates the story.

“We were about 15 years old then. Balu and I went to the farm. It was my father’s farm, and we set fire to the bush to smoke out grasscutters from their hideouts. Not long after, the grasscutters started to scamper about. Then I noticed a very big one as it entered into a small hole, or so I thought. I approached it. Something protruded and swayed to the right and left at the mouth of a hole. I bent down and tried to pull it out. I pulled and pulled, but the more I pulled, the longer it took to come out. I knew something was wrong.”

Lugo comes out and Oreke takes a seat on Ashafa’s right hand side.

Ashafa continues. “I yelled at Balu to come over to help pull. He came. We pulled together. I guessed he saw what I didn’t see, or he sensed something was wrong. Balu let go of the object and started to scream as he ran away. I thought he was possessed by the devil. I looked at the long, scaly tail in my hand. I gazed at it again. I dropped it. I yelled as I started to run to the village. I’d never run like that in my life. I swear, my heels were touching the nape of my neck as I ran.”

Ashafa pauses as everyone waits earnestly to hear what happened next. He tells Oreke to give him some water to drink. Oreke leaves and comes back in a jiffy with a cup of water, eager to hear the rest of the story.

“Tell them what it was,” Balu says teasingly with a devious smile on his face.

“Maybe not today,” Ashafa says. “I’ll continue the story another day.” He stands up and faces the path to his house.

“Ashafaaaa,” Balu says, “Tell them now.”

“It wasn’t a grasscutter. It was, it was, a viper, a snake,” Ashafa says in a fit of laughter.

Everybody laughs heartily, Lugo tumbles onto the ground, and others slap one another merrily. The laughter fills the square in the bright night. Not far way, the soft voices of children float around as they enjoy their own tales by moonlight.

When Two Snakes Fight

When there is no mediator, two fighters battle to death – Yoruba proverb

Mersee sits gloomily in a corner of the hot, dank cell #20 at the women's prison at Kirikiri, Lagos. Her eyes are misty and red with grief. She has been weeping with intermittent sobs ever since she arrived at the cell early that morning. She's unable to clearly observe the other cell mates in the poorly lit room. There is a power failure in the prison. The main source of light comes from the sunlight that peeps through the thick five iron bars close to the concrete ceilings. The cell reeks of the putrid smell of urine and stink from the pit latrine five rooms away. As she sobs, Mersee tries to remember the incidents that took place in September.

"What are you here for?" a deep voice from the opposite corner of the cell fills the 10-by-10-foot room.

At that instance, Mersee looks in the direction of the huge woman who shares her cell. Mersee squints. The woman is a towering presence with an aggressive demeanor.

"Hello. I just asked what brought you here," the deep-voiced woman asks again with authority.

"Murder," Mersee replies curtly. She glances at her cellmate, looks around the cramped quarters and catches her breath. There are six other people in the room—eight occupants in all.

The woman stands up, struts forward, and tenderly grabs Mersee's cold hands.

"The same cruel fate has brought us here together then," the woman says huskily. "By the way, my name is Defia. And here has been my home for the past 10 years. And here is where my soul will be until I die."

The other occupants in the cell approach Mersee and shake her hands to welcome her into the fold. As silence fills the space, Mersee bursts into

chattering sobs.

“Who was that fortunate person whom you dispatched to the great beyond and why?” Defia asks. Mersee continues sobbing and gasping spasmodically. Then, she swallows hard and breaks down again. Defia wraps her arms around Mersee and tells her to stop crying. Tenderly, she takes the tips of her fingers and wipes the tears from Mersee’s cheeks. Mersee gradually regains her calm, and recounts what happened on a dismal Friday night that she will never forget.

She and Jeri had been married for a year. September 30 was their wedding anniversary, and Mersee had expected Jeri to return home early after the close of business so that they could go out to the restaurant to celebrate. However, Jeri came in around 10 p.m. with stray hairs on the shoulders of a rumpled shirt. He reeked of the perfume of a strange woman. After kissing Jeri passionately on the lips, Mersee asked him why he hadn’t returned earlier or picked up her numerous calls. She said she was worried something was wrong.

Jeri replied that all was well, and that he had a backlog of work at the office. Mersee knew this was a lie. Even when Jeri was busy, he accepted her calls. A whiff of the strange perfume hit her again. She decided to keep calm as Jeri went into the bedroom.

Still in a caring and loving mood, Mersee followed him inside. She was surprised when Jeri kicked off his shoes, and laid down on the bed.

Patiently, she sat down by the bed and asked about the special outing they had planned for that night. He answered curtly that it was cancelled and he wanted to rest. Mersee couldn’t believe it. She demanded to know why? Jeri took this as an affront and slapped her on the face. The impact flung Mersee to the floor. She tried to get up. She was not ready to be a punching bag that night. It had happened before, often after she had queried her husband about his whereabouts, and she was afraid of it happening again.

As she tried to pull herself together, another slap from Jeri’s big palm snapped her from her thoughts. Mersee staggered. Her eyes traveled to the

half-filled wine bottle close to the bed lamp. She had drunk some early in the night. She went straight for it and grabbed it. Mersee smashed it furiously on Jeri's forehead. It shattered into pieces as the liquid splashed into the air and drenched Jeri's white shirt. The impact dazed him for some moments. Mersee, still consumed with ire, held on to the stump of the bottle. With a heavy heave, she stabbed Jeri on the left chest. He staggered like a drunken monkey. Mersee still held firmly to the bottle stump and stabbed him in anger as he landed on the rug.

Mersee couldn't believe what had happened. She tried to scoop Jeri up. But he was limp. She wrapped her hands around him and tenderly called him. He didn't respond. She shook him vigorously. Mersee ran to the door and shouted for help to the neighbors who rushed to her house and saw her hapless husband slumped on the floor. They lifted Jeri's body and drove to the hospital. He died on the way. The police later interrogated Mersee, booked her and charged her with murder. At the first hearing, the judge decided she should be remanded in prison while awaiting trial.

"My daughter, you have done so much, and you couldn't have done anything else," Defia says after Mersee had recounted the story.

Mersee doesn't utter another word. Finally, after a long silence, one of the cell mates, a soft-spoken woman named Rubi, offers sympathy. "When a pleasure is shared, the enjoyment is diminished," she says.

"But I didn't mean to kill him," Mersee protests.

"Yes, we know. You only fought for your dignity," Rubi says.

"I can't pass judgment on you. We leave you to your conscience to decide. I can't say what you did was wrong. But I'm sure you were right. After you have listened to my story, you can judge if I'm also right or wrong," Defia says.

"Here's my own tale," Defia starts. "I've told it countless times to my fellow travelers in this cell. Many have come and gone, and some have gone to the beyond. But I'll give you the gist."

Mersee stands up from the bare concrete floor and moves toward Defia, who sits on a blanket spread on the floor. It is the only blanket in the cell, and as the "chairman" of the room, only Defia is entitled to such luxury.

"I married my husband when I was 23 years old. I had just graduated from the university with a first-class honor degree," Defia recounts. "I knew he was a lecher, after all we attended the same university. Truly, he was my first boyfriend because I attended an all-girls' secondary school. I never knew any man before I went to the university. Anyway, we married though I knew he was promiscuous. The mistake I made, and which many women make is this. When we marry wayward and unfaithful men, we think we can change them or time or old age will change them. Whereas the men strongly believe that we have taken them for what they were; that we are comfortable with their philandering as long as they still come home every night.

"Two months after our marriage, rumors began to filter to me that he was still keeping many of his old girlfriends. I was insecure then. I didn't want to lose him. I was not prepared for a divorce. Not that soon. Then we had our first child ─ a boy. The second child came three years later ─ a girl. We continued to live a cat-and-dog life, although to the rest of the world everything looked blissful.

"I never thought I'd lose my mind because of a man. He kept late nights, drank a lot. As he aged, he became more adulterous than a he-goat. But the day I heard he was having an affair with my best friend, my chief bridesmaid, I lost my head.

"It was a Friday, and he told me he had an official trip to Abuja; that he would be back on Sunday. So he left. I didn't doubt him much because he had made such trips in the past, whether true or false. Some of those trips turned out to be true because I checked them out with his boss at his office. However, this particular trip was a lie, a big fat lie. Later in the day, one of my friends called me and said that she saw my husband sauntering, hand in hand, into a hotel in Ikoyi with my best friend.

“I left for the hotel. I knew my husband would sleep there overnight with the shameless woman. So, I decided to stake out. After about three hours at the hotel lobby, my nerves became very frail, and I couldn’t take it any longer. So, I approached the receptionist, a charming and dashing young man. I gave him my name, a wrong name. I told him Mr. Rawbadsin was expecting me and asked whether he had checked in. You wouldn’t believe it. My husband was foolish enough to check in using his real name.

“Anyway, the receptionist called him on the phone. But while he dialed the phone, I peeked at the numbers. I thought it could also be the room number. Someone picked the phone on the other end. The receptionist told me the person to whom he spoke with was not expecting any visitor.

“I was mad. I wasn’t prepared to let go easily. I went back to the lobby, sat in a corner, and ordered a bottle of Campari. I drank almost all of it. Then I stood and I decided to go, to nowhere in particular. When I got to the car park, I was confused about what to do. By luck, I saw my husband’s official car, a Toyota Camry. My head just flew off.

“I was still in this miserable state when I saw the outline of two people approaching the car park. It was my husband and Lesty. I quickly hid behind a palm tree about 30 feet away. They kissed, held hands and embraced. That’s when I backed away unnoticed. I went to where I parked my car and drove home—in a deranged state of mind.

“On Sunday evening, my husband returned home. He told me he had a very successful trip and the contract was signed. I thought to myself, signed indeed. I had prepared his favorite *egusi* soup with pounded yam and placed them on the dining table. I told him I had already eaten, so he ate alone.

“After the heavy meal, we retired to the bedroom. There, I offered myself to him as a dutiful wife. And the fulfillment was mutually passionate. It had never been so fervent, and it would never be, again.

“Ten minutes later, we rested and laid down side by side. Suddenly, his body began to jerk, to jerk violently. It was like an epileptic seizure. He started to froth in the mouth, and he wriggled like the severed tail of a wall

gecko. That was when I pinned him down and sat on his hairy chest while he begged softly that I should take him to the hospital. His eyes were misty, very cloudy. Five minutes later, he was dead. And I embraced him, and we lay there together in warm embrace for about 30 minutes. I then called the police."

"That was so callous," Mersee says. "How could you do that? Where is love?"

Defia looks at her indifferently.

'"Love?" Defia replies. "The love was always there. I loved him with passion and hated him with the same destructive jealousy. And it was that same love that made me to save him from a demon that would have eventually destroyed him."

"But wait a minute," Mersee says thoughtfully. "Something is amiss in your story. You mean he died as a result of rigorous love making?"

"I wished it was that," Defia retorts. "If that was the case, I wouldn't be here for the past 10 years awaiting trial for murder. Anyway, I am happy that was not so, else the revenge would not have been as sweet as I wanted. I dutifully killed him with..."

Just then, a warder bangs the iron bars. It is time for lunch. The warder lowers silver bowls underneath an iron bar and slips them into cell 20. As Mersee lifts the lid of one of the bowls, the aroma of curry and ginger fills the room. The bowl is filled to the brim with watery bean porridge. Noticing that the beans are few and that the broth is primarily water, she sighs.

Defia glances at Mersee, who is not eating, and tells her to get used to prison foods because the quality wasn't going to improve. Besides, she explains, dinner will be even worse.

Mersee decides to try a few scoops. After a few spoonfuls, she ogles her cell mates as they devour their meager, tasteless lunch.

“Where did I stop?” Defia asks, directing her question to nobody. At that moment, lightning flashes across the iron bars and illuminates her well-chiseled checks and lavish bosom. The sky is overcast and the wind is blowing furiously.

“You killed him with,” says a faint voice from a corner of the cell.

“Thank you, Orene,” Defia says. “Oh yes, I laced the egusi soup of the creepy, lecherous lizard with poison, and he ate it lovingly.” She ends with a wry smile, while the other inmates join with mischievous giggles. But not Mersee.

“That was indeed callous,” Mersee interrupts. “I ask again, where is love? Don’t tell me love and hatred are the same.”
“I didn’t say so,” Defia replies. “But where one exits, the other is also present. Both come from the same fountain, the same source; they are both creatures of passion. A woman can either love or hate with passion. And there is no middle course. And when the love of a woman is scorned, even a feather in her hand is deadlier than a sword.”

“Don’t you have any regret?” Mersee says in a quivering voice.

Defia pauses for five seconds, heaves and says: “No; my only regret is that I couldn’t kill the other woman.”

“Revenge is mine says the Lord,” Mersee says.

“Yes, I believe you. And when I meet my creator, I’m ready to stand in defense for helping the almighty God to avenge,” Defia responds brusquely.

“That’s sounds blasphemous,” Mersee replies angrily.

“And you sound like a hypocrite,” Defia says coldly. “Even the Lord blesses those who avenge for him.”

Mersee shakes her head in disagreement. She thinks that the man who turned this bright, charming woman to a brooding viper has indeed done a great damage to morality.

“Haven’t you read about one enraged woman in the Holy Book,” Defia says. “This is not a story about a jealous lover, but about a passionate zealot.”

Mersee is not sure what story Defia has in mind. Defia then moves toward her blanket and pulls a small black-covered bible from underneath. She flips the pages, and stops at Judges, Chapter 4. She gives Mersee to read from verses 15 to 23.

Defia moves toward the faint light through the iron bars.

Mersee reads: *“And the Lord discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the sword before Barak; so that Sisera lighted down off his chariot, and fled away on his feet.*

But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the host, unto Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left.

Howbeit Sisera fled away on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite: for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.

And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said unto him, turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not. And when he had turned in unto her into the tent, she covered him with a mantle.

And he said unto her, give me, I pray thee, a little water to drink; for I am thirsty. And she opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink, and covered him.

Again he said unto her, stand in the door of the tent, and it shall be, when any man doth come and enquire of thee, and say, Is there any man here?

that thou shalt say, No.

Then Jael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will shew thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples.

So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel."

Defia gingerly takes the bible from Mersee and flips the page forward.

"Ha, ha," Defia says, "I want you to read particularly this. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, then, verses 24 to 27."

Mersee reads: *"Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day, saying,*

Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves."

"*Verse 24: Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent.*

He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish.

She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples.

At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead."

Mersee is stunned.

“My pious friend, I’ve tried to find a true meaning to that—to love and hate, but I’m lost and confused. If the Lord is jealous, who am I to deviate from his omnipresence?” Defia says stoically.

“But everyone has a duty to obey the law of the land. For in that we create a just society,” Mersee interjects.

“I’m solely accountable to my treasured conscience and not to any earthly law,” Defia replies. “And the noblest of all duties is to obey your conscience.”

Mersee regards her quietly, then shakes her head. “Perhaps this is a time for the renewal of souls, a time for you to beg God to forgive you and purify your outrageous, arrogant conscience,” she says after a long pause. “For God is just, although the justice of man is unjust. And it does not profit the almighty to destroy a soul which man has unjustly damned. I’ve regretted what I did. It was at the spur of the moment. I’ve asked God for forgiveness, and I’m paying the price now. I’m against the shedding of blood, because it is evil. I’ll also continue to pray for you for the good Lord to soften your heart.”

“So, does that mean you support infidelity?” Defia asks.

“No. I truly believe partners should be forever faithful to each other,” Mersee replies. “What I’m against is shedding of blood because a lover has been jilted or because of infidelity. And the way you did it in cold blood. How can you kill him and continue to embrace his corpse?”

“You see, my daughter, my friend, even when two snakes fight they embrace each other. And sometime it may be till death separates them,” Defia says coldly as she looks intently at Mersee’s cherubic face.

To this day, in this dingy cell, a penitent soul and a vengeful conscience continue to discuss the true meaning of absolute good and absolute evil

until death separates them.

The Lucky Charm

A hunter who carries an elephant on his head should not use his feet to till the soil for a cricket. – Yoruba proverb

It is 3:25 p.m. on a bright Monday. A gray, bearded man descends the Ojuelegba Bridge in Lagos and his car begins to sputter. He pumps the accelerator as the car jerks like a stubborn goat. He wonders what's wrong. After all, this is a brand new Mercedes-Benz, purchased two weeks ago from a reliable dealer. He continues driving and the car coasts further down the bridge. It moves slowly, causing the other drivers to honk their horns impatiently. The bearded man is oblivious. "Callous Lagos drivers," he mutters to himself.

He descends the bridge and veers toward the service lane of the oncoming vehicles from the Ojuelegba roundabout junction and steers the car toward the walkway slowly. After about five meters, he turns the car into the pedestrian walkway by the fence of the Abalti Barracks, about 20 meters from the gate. The engine stalls.

He sits in the car and, once again, wonders what's wrong. Why the problem on his way to a multimillion-naira business meeting with a foreign partner at Ikeja? He starts the engine again. It sputters.

"The beast," he shouts as he winds down the driver's window. A whiff of fresh air hits him in the face—quite different from the new car fragrance he'd been breathing all afternoon. He reaches under the dashboard and pulls a lever to open the bonnet, steps out of the car and raises the bonnet. He stands, confused about what exactly to do. Then he goes back into the car and opens the booth, picks up a pair of pliers, and goes back to the bonnet. He hits the battery terminal with the pliers several times. Maybe this will work, he thinks, as he goes back into the car and starts the engine. It crackles, then stalls.

"This is just my unlucky day," he says and waves his hands in the air dejectedly. Just then, he sees two men crossing the four lane highway and walking toward him from the Ayilara street side. The man sizes them up.

One is stocky like a wooden barrel and draped in an old-fashioned green tweed coat so wrinkled it looks like he has been wearing it in his sleep. He has a fist-size, lion's head pendant neck chain. His colleague is tall and lanky and dressed in a blue shirt, and a blue tie with black polka dots. Threads sprout from the lapel of his collar. His trousers seem to be angry at the ground; they barely reach his ankles, thus exposing red socks that clash with his scuffed, brown shoes.

"Hello," says the man, as he hastily glances at the shoes of the lanky stranger.

"Hi, buddy," they both answer in unison.

"You gotta problem?" the lanky fellow asks in a fake American accent.

"Well, sort of," the gray-bearded man replies.

"What's ya problem?" the barrel-chested guy asks.

"One of those unlucky days," the bearded man intones. "The car just decides to mess me up."

At that moment, the barrel-chested guy grabs the pliers and goes to the bonnet. He removes the plug caps and notices that they are soaked with engine oil. He shows one of the plugs to the bearded man. After about five minutes of cleaning the plugs with a rag and blowing air into them with his mouth, he places them back on the plug sockets. Then, the lanky fellow slips underneath the car. Moments later, he emerges with the fuel filter and shows it to the bearded man.

"This gas filter is dirty, man," he says as he blows air into the filter. "Anyway, I've blown the gaddem dirt away." He slips underneath the car again and emerges after about 20 seconds.

He tells the Mercedes owner to start the engine. He follows instructions and marvels as the engine responds with a smooth low noise. The lanky man then tells him to switch it off and start again. The car responds with a

rhythmical vroom. Elated, the bearded guy switches off the engine and steps out of the car.

“Gentlemen, thank you very much,” he says. “How much should I give for this service?”

“Men, we aren’t a roadside mechanics,” Mr. Barrel-chest says. “We just saw a brother, a buddy in distress, and just wanted to help.”

“Yeah man,” his friend adds. “When we saw ya, we thought this was a perfect gentleman who has been treated badly by a machine.”

“In that case, gentlemen, since you wouldn’t like to take money for this favor, I will like to say thank you very much,” the man says. He dips his hand into the inner pocket of his suit and brings out a gold-plated business card holder. He gives a card each to the fellows. As he opens the car door, the lanky fellow touches him on the shoulder.

“Your business card says you are the managing director of Creative Ventures. What’s that all about?” he asks.

“Oh, that? We are into a lot of creative businesses, you know”

“Well, we’ve just returned from the United States.” the lanky fellow says. “Actually we live in the United States and just came here a couple of days to meet our business partners.”

“Maybe you’ll be interested in our business,” adds his associate. “It’s a multimillion-dollar income generating business, which has made many people wealthy beyond their imaginations.”

The bearded man doesn’t say a word as he listens attentively to the duo. Maybe today is not an unlucky day after all, he thinks. Then he looks at the fellows, and observes their shabby clothing. They seem to read his mind.

“And don’t look at our appearance to judge us. We are indeed multimillionaires,” the lanky fellow says. “Lagos is a dangerous place to

flaunt your wealth. We have to be careful not to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves."

"And what's this business of yours?" he asks.

"We sell a wealth creation system," the lanky one says in a soft whisper. "And our office is just about two minutes' drive from here. Would you like to see the place?"

The gray-bearded man says okay and invites the men into his car. Just about a kilometer into the trip, they instruct him to turn right onto a bumpy, dusty road. Horns blare from commercial motorcyclists, also known as Okadas, as the riders avoid the potholes while aiming for the small patches of flat ground. After about 30 meters, the car makes a left turn.

The man's eyes travel to a tall, fair-complexioned lady, probably in her early twenties, who loiters near a bungalow across the street. She has no shirt on, but a red brassiere and white shorts which expose her shapely thighs and legs.

He looks ahead toward a green, two-story building where a woman in a black chiffon camisole and high-heeled shoes stands seductively.

Then, his eyes meander to another young girl next to a poorly-maintained bungalow with a blue, tattered window blind and broken door. She wears a white organza blouse, and her hair is unkempt. Their eyes meet. He quickly averts his gaze.

Here and there, young girls in short skirts, tight tops and wispy dresses sit in groups or alone in seductive postures. Nearby, a tipsy-looking man embraces a woman who stands by a low brick fence in front of a dilapidated house. The man pats her on her behind, then places his right arm loosely around her bare, round waist. The couple jauntily enters the rundown home.

A few minutes later, the lanky fellow announces that they have reached their destination. As they exit the car, the stench of urine and feces hit the bearded man's nostrils. His eyes travel to an unfinished building with

broken doors. Half-naked young boys and girls, in worn pants, scramble about. Momentarily, his eyes catch a young teenage girl strutting along the street in a skimpy red skirt. She puffs a cigarette.

The man follows his companions into a bungalow with rusty roofs. The compound is dotted with stagnant pools of water here and there. The cream-colored wall has lost its luster, and now assumes the appearance of a burnt mushroom. Confused and quite uncomfortable, the bearded man asks the fellows where, exactly, they are.

One of them explains that the area is known as the Empire Hotel vicinity. About a couple of streets away lies Moshalashi street. Many years ago, the Kalakuta Republic, a communal compound which belonged to popular African-beat musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, was located at 14 Agege Motor Road, Idi-Oro, Mushin. The unknown soldiers set the compound on fire on February 18, 1977, because Fela had ridiculed soldiers in one of his albums. In a song, he described soldiers as zombies who obeyed orders blindly. During the attack, Fela was beaten, and his elderly mother was thrown from a window. She died later from the injury.

The man is afraid, but he follows the duo into a narrow, dimly lit hallway. They stop after three doors, open a room, touch a switch, and turn on a soft light from a yellow bulb. The room smells like burnt mud and reeks of cigarettes and stale beer. The men sit down on a bed that creaks and offer their new acquaintance a seat close to the door and a drink from a bottle stashed in a half-closed cupboard. The man declines. Meanwhile, the barrel-chested guy swigs the drink like a fish.

“Schnapps is truly the drink of kings,” he says.

But Mr. Gray Beard is not the least bit interested. After all, he can detect the smell of the local gin, *ogogoro*, poured into a Seaman’s Aromatic Schnapps bottle. His thoughts are on the wealth creation system and how this venture will change his life forever.

The barrel-chested guy brings him back to earth as he whips out a black leather suitcase stuffed with piles of black banknote-sized papers. The guy

explains that they brought the banknotes in a container from the U.S., and had intentionally stained them in black to deceive the Nigerian Customs officials at the ports. He adds that a chemical exists which can clean the banknotes.

As he says this, his business partner flashes a small vial of washing liquid and asks their bearded guest to pick any of the black banknotes.

He gingerly picks one and hands it to him. Momentarily, the barrel-chested guy distracts the bearded man by shoving the plastic cup, thereby spilling the local gin onto the table.

However, the man notices as the lanky fellow deftly pulls something like a black bank note from underneath the table. What is it? And why the surreptitious slights of hand? He wonders.

The lanky fellow pours the washing chemical on the black paper. Gradually, the image of a $100 bill appears. The bearded man is stunned.

How did the magic happen? Here is an explanation of the trick, also known as the money-washing scam.

The money in the suitcase is not real currency. It is black construction paper. However, the con men coated some genuine hundred-dollar bills with a protective layer of Elmer's glue. Thereafter, when they dip the money into a solution of tincture of iodine, the dried bills look and feel like black construction paper.

Their guest picked one of the pieces of construction paper, but as he handed it to one of them, the other distracted him so that his colleague could switch it with an iodine coated genuine dollar bill hidden under the table. The chemical solution for washing the money is actually crushed Vitamin C tablets dissolved in water.
The corrupt duo was desperately trying to pull their gray-bearded companion into a devious scam.

“Buddy, this business will indeed make you fabulously rich,” one of them says. “We can wash a minimum of two million dollars for you, or you can increase it to whatever amount. All you need to bring as the minimum is two hundred thousand naira to buy the chemical to wash the bank notes and another two hundred thousand naira as professional fees.”

The man ponders the proposal for about two minutes as the music of Oliver De Coque, the Ogene superstar, wafts across from one of the rooms. He can hear the lyrics of the track, “Funny, funny, identity.” From the adjoining room, the soft moan of a woman and the groan of a man in ecstasy filter into his ears. He knows the sound from the woman is fake, but what about the man’s? It sounds more like pain than pleasure. Why, he wonders, did the groaning man seek out a prostitute to fulfill his desire? Is he a young or old man? Is he a single or married man? Is he using a condom?

“What do you think about the business?” the barrel-chested guy asks.

“It’s a deal, gentlemen,” the man says, suppressing his enthusiasm. “I will get 800,000 naira ready tomorrow. That will be for four million dollars.” The man stands up to leave the room. Then he looks back and says: “You see, I’m a pastor in my church. I will not want any of my congregation to see me in this environment. Let’s meet at the Sheraton Hotel, Ikeja. I’ll be waiting for you at the lobby tomorrow at 7:30 p.m.”

The duo look at each other for about five seconds, then shrug their shoulders in agreement.

“That’s OK buddy,” they say in unison. They shake his hand one after the other and say good-bye.

As he leaves the room, his eyes meet those of a stranger coming out of the next room—the groaning man. He walks to the side of the corridor, making room for the guy to pass. When they both reach an open space, he observes the fellow. He is a scruffy man, wearing soiled, shabby trousers. His shoulders droop, and he has an extensive stomach. The fellow jumps on top of a motorbike and soon vanishes from Oguntokun Street to the Yaba bus stop road.

A man has been made a king yet he's searching for a good luck charm. Does he want to become God? (In other words, being crowned a king is about the best fortune a mortal could hope for)—Yoruba proverb.

That night, the bearded man cannot sleep. He tumbles and rolls on his bed and frets about his meeting with the two fellows earlier in the day. His thoughts are not about the sudden wealth which he has been assured, but the characters of those fellows. What is prosperity? he ponders. How can a man channel his energy positively to be prosperous? What about those fellows? Based on their skill and knowledge of auto mechanics, they're probably intelligent, he thinks. At the very least, they're bright enough to engage in a profitable trade to earn a good living.

As he continues to ponder and roll on the bed, his wife wakes up and asks him why he is so restless. He tells her all is well, then pecks her on the cheek. Drops of sweat trickle down his face, even in the air-conditioned room. His hands tremble, and his heart pounds heavily. He gets out of bed and goes to his study room where he sorts through the bookshelves until he finds his favorite book, *As A Man Thinketh*, by James Allen. He flips through the pages, then stops to read.

"*A noble and Godlike character is not a thing of favor or chance, but is the natural result of continued effort in right thinking, the effect of long-cherished association with Godlike thoughts. An ignoble and bestial character, by the same process, is the result of the continued harboring of groveling thoughts."*
He places the book carefully onto the bookshelf. Then picks another book by the author, "Eight Pillars of Prosperity." He searches the page for the first pillar–energy. He reads softly.

"*The man of energy exerts himself to the accomplishment of some end, or ends. The end may be a good one or a bad one; but if a bad one, that is the abuse of energy which reacts destructively on the doer, like one striking a wall with his fist, and only injures his own hand. Energy is always good, but it is only useful when applied to good ends, and those ends, when reached, constitute happiness, success, prosperity."*

After reading those words, the man relaxes. He has an "ah ha moment," a moment of truth. Those fellows have an abundant amount of energy, he thinks, but in its application that they are greatly deficient.

He turns the page, over, and over until he gets to the third pillar–integrity.

"*There is no striking a cheap bargain with prosperity. It must be purchased, not only with intelligent labor, but with moral force. As the bubble cannot endure, so the fraud cannot prosper. He makes a feverish spurt in the acquirement of money, and then collapses. Nothing is ever gained, ever can be gained, by fraud. It is but wrested for a time, to be again returned with heavy interest... What is a thief but a man who carries to its logical extreme the desire to possess without giving a just return—that is, unlawfully?"*

He ponders more on this as he sits in deep thought in the book-filled room. Then he begins to doze. At last, the sweet sleep he longs for taps his eyelids softly. And he floats into peace.
The following Tuesday, the man drives from his residence at Palmgrove towards Maryland. Behind the wheel, his mind swings like a pendulum, wavering back and forth to the texts he read the previous night. He continues to reflect on those philosophical words over and over again, relying on introspection to pass time. By the time he turns from the Maryland Bridge on to Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way, he is completely engrossed in thought. About three minutes later, he is close to the Sheraton Hotel. As he veers right into the hotel gate, his eyes journey to the Opebi U-turn road, close to the hotel fence on the left. His two new acquaintances are standing under a tree, trying not to look conspicuous. He drives into the car park and heads into the lobby. It's 7:10 p.m.

As he sits at the lobby bar, he swings his head in nostalgia to the melodious highlife music of Dr. Victor Olaiya (the Evil Genius of Highlife), being played by the in-house live band.

Ilu le o ko sowo lode
Obirin nkigbe, okurin nkigbe
Kaluku lo nkigbe owo

The times are hard, there is no money to spend
Women and men, all cry
About this cash crunch

Twenty minutes later, the con men saunter into the lobby. He beckons and shepherds them to a table at the south end of the restaurant. It's a window seat, away from other patrons. He calls a waiter and orders a bottle of champagne. Five minutes later, the waiter returns with a bottle immersed in ice cubes in a stainless steel bucket. The waiter opens the bottle and pours the drink into three wine glasses.
"This is for a new beginning and an everlasting friendship," the gray-bearded man says, while they clink glasses.

Then he reaches under the table and pulls out a brown brief case. He unlocks the case and watches the eyes of his guests gleam. And he stops.

"I have a confession, gentlemen," he says. "I'm not really the fool you think I am. But first, I'd like to thank you for rescuing me from the problem I had with the car yesterday. I also thank you for the business proposal–the wealth creation system."

The waiter appears with the menu to take orders. He orders his first course —sea bass roll stuffed with mussels and artichoke sauce. He also orders the main course—filet of beef sautéed in Marsala wine with goose liver and truffle on potatoes, spinach croquette-style. He asks the fellows if they would like to eat. They decline by shaking their heads.

He continues: "From our interaction yesterday, I think you guys are intelligent. What really baffles me from the manner you fixed the car is that you both have a good profession which can indeed bring fortunes to you, only if you can channel your mechanical skills and ingenuity into a positive energy." He stops as the fellows look on in amazement, mouths agape at the turn of events.

"Let me tell you who I am," he says as he stands up and puts his right hand into his right pocket. "Well, I'm indeed into creative business; creative

writing. I'm a writer and an author. You, gentlemen, have just given me the concluding chapter of a collection of short stories that I'm working on."

The lanky fellow dips his hand into the breast pocket of his black suede suit. Momentarily, the bearded man waves to three heavyset men in well-cut suits who sit about 30 feet away.

"Friends, those men over there are also my friends," he cautions. "I brought them in case you want to try something silly." He stands up while the dazed con artists watch nervously.

"My buddies, you may keep my empty brief case. Honestly, it's a genuine Louis Vuitton case, and I'm sure it's enough compensation for you for your roles as characters in my story book," he says.

As he leaves, he turns back and faces the fellows, and adds: "By the way, you can have the remaining champagne—it's truly a drink of kings."

He chuckles as he remembers what the lanky fellow had said the previous day while swirling the local gin.

GLOSSARY

AGEMO MASQUERADER – A fetish mat dancer from the Ijebu region of Nigeria. It is believed by its followers to be a divine being

AMULET – An object believed to bring good luck to its owner

ANKARA – A cloth, which originated from Ghana, with vibrant patterns of festive, colorful pattern designs and/or symbols. In some parts of Africa, certain families or communities wear the same Ankara pattern for social events and celebrations.

APALA MUSIC – A percussion-based musical genre derived from the Yoruba people of Nigeria

BAOBAB TREE – Known as the tree of life, the baobab provides food, clothing and water for human inhabitants of the African savannah. It has been called the "upside down tree," because it is leafless most of the year and looks as if its roots are in the air.

BEMBE – A type of drum that imitates speech and tonal quality

BREADFRUIT TREE – A flowering tree that grows in tropical climates

CALABASH – a beverage container made from a dried, tubular squash

EGUSI SOUP – A West African stew made of melon seeds

GARRI – A West African staple food made of cassava (a root vegetable)

IGUNNUKO MASQUERADERS – Dancers dressed in cylindrical robes of varying colors and shape. While performing, an Igunnuko (believed by followers to be a deity) can reach a height of twenty-five to thirty feet high and can descend to two feet.

JUJU – A word used to describe West African spiritual traditions and beliefs in the supernatural

KOBO – A monetary unit of Nigeria; 100 kobos equal one Naira

KUREKURE – A twirling, acrobatic style dance performed by a short Igunnuko (see above description)

NAIRA – The currency of Nigeria

SHUKU HAIRSTYLE – A series of intricately woven braids, popular among Yoruba women.

A TOUT – A British expression for any person who aggressively solicits business in highly-populated areas

VICARAGE – The residence of a vicar

YORUBA – One of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa

ZONAL VICAR – A representative or deputy of a municipality or religious order

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The author enjoys reading, writing and listening to Apala (a musical genre originally derived from the Yoruba people of Nigeria) as well as Highlife (a music genre popular across West Africa) and instrumental and classical music.

He and his wife, Omolade, have three children—Tobi, Toni (also called Daniel), and Toyin.

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